PENUMBRAE

An Occult Fiction Anthology

EDITED BY

RICHARD GAVIN, PATRICIA CRAM

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Richard Gavin, Patricia Cram
&
Daniel A. Schulke

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PENUMBRÆ
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Introduction

IN SPEAKING OF the fey and the fleshless, of the powers of the realm of shadows, the storyteller is confronted with vexing questions. What may be uttered to convey the ineffable? By what sign does one declare passage beyond the hem of reason and matter? Where, indeed, is the grammar of the depths that churns untouched by the striving light of the five physical senses?

For millennia the response to such questions has been the utilization of a precious faculty within mankind. In profane realms this faculty is often referred to as imagination, but because this term is now so generalized and burdened with dismissive notions ("it was only your imagination"), any precision or potency the word once possessed have been wrung from it. As they are popularly understood, works of the imagination are often viewed as commodities, outgrowths of common human experience rendered into entertainments which a consumer may employ to while away a few hours in an act of pleasant escapism.

But pulsing underneath this commercial detritus is a vital core that, when channeled with earnestness and skill, restores the creative imaginative faculty in humankind to its rarefied station, which, as Islamic scholar Henry Corbin (1903–1978) postulated, is the vital means of engaging the immaterial layers of reality that would otherwise remain unknown in the human sphere.

The locus of the present anthology is in work that embodies precisely such a metaphysical position, as opposed to fiction that merely employs metaphysical trappings to enforce a materialist worldview. Far beyond mere description, work thusly oriented possesses the capacity to seduce, captivate, and incept states of magical consciousness. It intoxicates the rite of reading as much as it permeates the spaces *between* readings. In certain cases, such work serves as a vessel indwelt by the entities which populate the story, and who are summoned anew by its reading.

Marriage between the objective and the imaginative often results in an enrichment of existence. All spiritual traditions stand upon a foundation of both worldly Act and transcendent Idea. Idea becomes Image, Image becomes Symbol, Symbol becomes Portal. Through the Act of passing through this Portal, one is thereby transformed. It thus becomes clear why the annals of occultism are lush with fable, poetry, mythology, and tales.

The merits of occult fiction are legion. In the most utilitarian sense, narratives that describe states of rarefied awareness provide a vessel within which such experiences are granted context and cohesion—a pathway, in other words, toward deeper understanding and nuanced appreciation. Furthermore, a delicate but highly potent quality of the work is the creation of a spirit-trap wherein the words and images themselves act as hosts to the experience itself. Under auspicious conditions, a reader may encounter a tale that hews so closely to their own interior universe that a Key is thereby given.

Such powers form the blood, nerves and sinew of occult fiction, which stands in marked contrast to secular fiction that merely deals with the occult. One of the deficiencies of this latter category is a sense of obligation on the part of its authors to provide excessive exposition concerning what various symbols or occult technologies represent. While this kind of narrative has its purpose as an educative tool, it is often hampered by its primer-like scaffolding. Pure occult fiction, by contrast, strives to evoke the energies that inform such symbols, and thereby create a vital experience for the reader.

The present resurgence of interest in the esoteric has led to an erosion of the perception of occultism as 'secret' or 'hidden'—a core of

its original meaning. While many consider that aspect to be sinistral, or residing purely in shadow, occult forces are a study in selective concealment and revelation. As much as what is hidden, what fragments are shown are deliberate, though often through the veils of smoke or the light of distant stars. The act of revelation, concealment, and incepting liminality between these states where matters are inchoate is as much part of the storyteller's enchantment as the denizens which populate the tale.

We, the editors, hope that this gathering of thirteen tales transfixes and transports, inducting readers to realms inexplicably resonant.

Wormwood Votaries

Richard Gavin

ILLNESS AND FEAR had been the stalwart companions of Langdon's youth. He was November's creature; a child of that drab term that hangs between autumn's vibrant beginnings and the jeweled austerity of winter. Because it was an in-between time, Langdon had always perceived himself to be something of an in-between creature. During those crucial formative years, this perception brought him only pain.

Whenever he had been surrounded by his peers on the playground, Langdon would realize how at odds his world was with that of the other children. Whenever he'd spoken, his comments had invariably seemed inappropriate, either in timing or in tone.

Loitering at the fence that distinguished the schoolyard from the city at large, Langdon used to press his back to the wire mesh and stare out at the noisy huddles of children who had all seemed so eager to either stomp over the world in order to leave some kind of imprint, or they were hungry to reduce the external world to a mere backdrop against their near-autistic imaginary life.

Langdon felt eternally condemned to hover somewhere between these two tribes, the aggressors and the escapists, for while he was neither athletic nor boisterous, he was also not a refugee from reality. He never once sought the sanctuary of make-believe. Perhaps this was because for as long as he could remember Langdon had felt a delicate

reality evolving within and around him, maturing as he himself did. Presences that Langdon could not see but certainly felt moved over him like insects of ice, ones that climbed the rungs of his spine and left a delicious chill in their wake.

On quiet, solitary afternoons he could almost hear a distant chorus of whispering that teased pleasantly at the whorls of his ears.

These presences left hints at the back of his mind, like trinkets on the doorstep of a superstitious homestead.

Often this process of visitation brought on an ugly vertigo that spiralled out from the base of the boy's skull and made him feel as though he was spinning like a top while yet remaining perfectly still.

The only way Langdon knew to stop this feeling was to grip the nearest solid object and brace himself until the hurricane passed. But even this act of self-preservation betrayed him, for the boy took to studying his hands and wondered if those were really his fingers and just what were fingers anyhow and what a queer thing it was to saddle one's self with a sack of fluid and bones in the first place...

It was not uncommon for the boy to see the lunulae of his fingernails stretching out like ten tiny waxing moons.

"I got a bottle of that *Bourgogne* you like," Langdon boasted as he entered the house's foyer. He wiped his left foot once, again, and a third time before removing the loafer. This ritual was repeated with the right before Langdon set the shoes in the dead centre of the rubber mat where they lived, their toes pointed true north.

He trotted up the main stairway and entered the bedroom with the bagged bottle held up proudly, as though it was some hard-won trophy.

The alteration to the room's order was so drastic that it actually stole Langdon's breath, made him feel physically violated.

"How do you like it?" Nancy called from the bathroom. Langdon turned to see his wife stationed before the medicine chest mirror, stretching her face in order to apply eyeliner.

"You moved it." His voice was a melodramatic gasp.

"I know."

"Why, Nancy?"

"Because I practically froze every night this past winter and I don't intend to broil now that summer's here. Covering the vent defeats the purpose of having a heating and cooling system. And it's a huge waste of money. Besides, I think it looks nicer this way." She passed by him and gave him a consolatory peck on the cheek. "Relax. Your side of the bed is still the same."

Langdon's attention was locked on the exposed furnace grate that was set into the carpeting. It seemed to be mocking him with a metal-teethed grin. Tufts of accumulated dust dangled from the grill like soft stalactites.

The numbness of shock began to melt away, and soon Langdon felt a tide of steely dread rising inside him. He breathed deeply, willfully, in order to keep the tide from breaching his emotional levee and drowning him.

Would he hear them again, he wondered? See them?

If only Nancy knew what she had set in motion; Langdon could practically hear the long-dormant gears of some great machine groaning to life, moving everything widdershins, everything inversely.

The chiming of the doorbell caused him to jolt, which obliterated his reverie.

He peered over the landing and saw the first guests, backlit by late evening sunbeams. Company continued to arrive in a steady stream. Langdon hastily changed into a fresh dress shirt, which he buttoned all the way up to the collar. He hoped, likely in vain, that the simple pleasures of spouse and old friends would enable him to forget about his benighted youth.

But just to be safe, he unlocked the wheels of the bed's frame and rolled the king-size slab over the vent.

On his way out Langdon gave the handle of the bedroom door three deosil turns before making his way to the dinner party downstairs.

The first time Langdon experienced the Votaries he was but a child, enrobed in the gauzy blur of influenza and lying in his snug bed. From there he passively watched as the root of his being plucked itself free with disturbing ease.

This other-Langdon began to roam, leaving his body behind it as an escaped prisoner would shackles.

All the reassuringly familiar sights of his bedroom began to smudge and fade as Langdon saw what this other self was seeing. It was as if he had a vine of pale light coiling lazily out of his forehead, his chest. This cord was the only thing that reined his other self in, for the blurry discarnate form felt riled and eager and hungry. The further the other-Langdon pulled away from the boy's prostrate body, the more disoriented the child became. He gripped the sides of his mattress, felt his limbs go rigid.

He then heard them, the whispers. It was an onslaught of staccato voices, none of which were distinct or familiar or indeed even decipherable. It was a mere jumble of pleas and beckoning calls, as though detuned shortwave radios had been scattered throughout the house.

Somehow, the other-Langdon became aware of the one unifying quality of these manic sermons: they were all emanating from somewhere below. They came slithering up through the floor vents like blasts of manufactured air.

In addition to having keen hearing, this amorphous other-Langdon seemed to be made out of eyes, for the child found himself able to see everything at once; his parents slumbering peacefully in their bed, the moon-paled furnishings of the living room, the second-hand (which, Langdon noted, was spinning the wrong way) of the clock on the kitchen wall, and lastly the open basement door.

When this sprawling net of sight stretched to include in its gaze the descending basement stairs, Langdon tried to protest. But the boy's jaw felt fused shut. He could but twitch and sweat as his consciousness pressed through the darkened door frame and began to lurch with tortuous patience down each of the wooden steps, toward a chamber Langdon had always loathed, for it was a dank place, cool and musty with neglect. And it was dark, even at high soon in midsummer, always...dark.

The portico-red walls of the stairway had been decorated with a row of paintings. Each picture was housed in a frame so ornate it was ugly. They hung from the crumbling plaster by thick copper wire.

The paintings were unnerving. Langdon was struck by the fact that they all looked as though they could have been fashioned by a child, even though there was a strange sophistication to their execution. They were the kind he would have loved to have painted had he possessed artistic talent.

They were of churchyards that basked in greenish light, of stalking, wise-looking beasts of wood, of rigid candle flames that jutted up to lick the clefts of buxom women of shadow. The one that captivated Langdon the most had transformed the frothy thunderheads of a raging storm into the whorled face of a demon. Its colours were vivid, the paint slathered on thickly. He could see hairs from the painter's brush lying trapped within the smears, as though the artist had painted the canvas while in a frenzy.

"*That's Stormbrow*," explained one of the chattering voices. It was female and it emerged from the din like a leaping fish breaking waters. Langdon was able to discern "*He cloaks his sermons in thunder...*" before the woman's words sank back into the susurrus.

The other-Langdon pressed nearer to the basement.

Had that been the voice of his aunt Thora, the lying boy wondered?

Unconcerned by these attempts at recognition, the other-Langdon pressed down the final few steps.

The cellar was awash in a wan absinthe-green glow. It seemed to pour forth from the hull of a great furnace, as though the source of the light was trapped there like a caged comet, a buried star.

The greenish shimmer spotlighted four piles of boughs. Langdon wondered if these had been cut from the ash tree that grew in his backyard. He had scaled those crooked limbs often enough to be able to read their knots and bends like a kind of Braille. These cut switches had been bound in what his aunt Thora had called faggots. They were piled neatly beside the great iron furnace. The axe that had been used to chop the wood rested in the corner, its burnished blade gleaming.

Strangely, Langdon was unfazed when he discovered that the basement was occupied.

By the time the final dinner guest departed, the wine had gone to Langdon's head enough to make him more amorous than frightened. He and Nancy bantered and flirted like two teenagers while they cleared the dining room table and loaded the dishwasher.

Afterwards Langdon boiled tea and settled next to Nancy on the sofa. The television was on but neither of them paid it any mind. In no time they wordlessly opted to relocate to the bedroom.

Their coupling was frantic and hotly impersonal. The exertion and his drunkenness allowed Langdon to sleep deeply until sunrise.

He planned to spend that Sunday engaged in yard work. After a cup of strong black coffee he was ready to mow the lawn.

Pushing the mower across the grass, Langdon was irked by the debris that was continually snapping under the blades.

He crouched down and found that the litter was ash wood, despite not having such a tree growing anywhere in the neighbourhood. Langdon righted himself and chewed his lower lip.

"Boo!" Nancy called sardonically from behind him. "Aw, you didn't even flinch."

"I saw you," Langdon answered.

"How? Do you have eyes in the back of your head?"

Langdon marched into the house without saying a word.

He paced from the kitchen to the living room and back again, all the while dreading the moment that Nancy would come in after him, armed with questions about his behaviour. Could he even articulate what was unnerving him? Did he himself even know?

Twenty-four hours ago Langdon had had everything successfully slotted in its proper place. Perhaps he had grown overconfident in his ability to keep life contained, for it was now unravelling with such swiftness, such ease. He questioned whether his current predicament could actually have been touched off by something as slight as nudging a piece of furniture a few feet from its long-standing niche. Could one exposed duct really have opened such a floodgate, ushered in such misrule?

This question rattled around Langdon's head like a loose bead.

But the bead was soon threaded with others of a similar kind, which caused a radiant picture to bloom at the back of Langdon's mind. A chill crept down his back, awakening what his aunt Thora had referred to as his Eyes of the Spine. (*Was this what she had meant, that confusion and terror could stretch the senses to a newfound height, a greater sensitivity?*)

Langdon no longer saw the living room wall at his rear. Instead he viewed himself standing as an adult in aunt Thora's drape-dimmed sitting room. He had spent so many afternoons there as a boy, the times when his mother had to earn their keep and he was too sick to attend school.

A fire crackled in the hearth. Aunt Thora was seated in her wing back chair, facing the flames.

The mantle was bare, save for a lone piece of statuary. The mere hint of it in the murky room was enough to make Langdon's heart ache with nostalgia. This statue had been one of those trinkets that childhood fascination elevated to the status of a magical fetish.

It was a small statue, approximately six-inches in height, and was of white marble carved in the shape of a faun. The figure's goatish legs were bent, its face leering. The cheekbones were so pronounced they were blade-keen. The eyes were without pupils, the mouth was frozen in mirthful laughter, or possibly a feral bellow.

The statue's base was of simple wood, which Langdon now viewed as being ash. He could not truly tell whether he was imprinting the memory with his mature perspective, or indeed if this was even a memory at all. A small copper plate was affixed to the base, upon which the following quote was engraved:

> 'THE CHASM WAS MERELY ONE OF THE ORIFICES OF THAT PIT OF BLACKNESS THAT LIES BENEATH US, EVERYWHERE...IT NEEDS NO EARTHQUAKE TO OPEN THE CHASM. A FOOTSTEP, A LITTLE HEAVIER THAN ORDINARY, WILL SERVE...'
>
> —Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*

The vision duly faded.

And then Langdon heard the whisper.

Its egress from the furnace vent was soft and languid. As t speaker or the nature of the message, Langdon could not ascer Fear propelled him out of the house and back into the yard whe found Nancy raking up the last of the ash boughs.

"What are you doing?" he asked, still breathless from the cha

"Helping," Nancy replied. She pointed with pride to the fruit her labours. The ash sticks were all tidily bound in several faggots lined up against the house.

On the fateful night of illness, the other-Langdon had entered basement and witnessed a trio of figures standing in the centre of room. Each of the three was frozen in a unique but equally aberra pose. One was twisted as a withered root, another stretched their l arm heavenward, the last was bent in a scythe-like curve. Masks re dered them anonymous. These masks were nothing more than pouc es of crushed velvet with no openings to afford the wearer vision breath. Each pouch was a different colour (earthen for the hunchir one, bone-white for the one with the scythe-like body, midnight blu flecked with stellar glints for the one who reached skyward) and eac was secured by a drawstring knotted around the neck.

The poses shared only one trait: each figure had an extended fore finger pressed to where their mouth would be; the universal signa for silence. They resembled condemned criminals who had somehow managed to escape the gallows.

Even though they were not facing him and even though they were masked, the boy somehow knew he was being watched. Did the lack of eyes somehow make them all-seeing, just as Langdon now was?

They lingered like great birds upon a taxidermist's shelf. Each figure was dressed in the same top and trousers, shapeless and genderless. These garments were similar to surgical scrubs, but were the colour of sackcloth.

Langdon would spend much of his subsequent life pondering what Spirits inspired their strange raiments, their unshakable asanas, their

ego-killing masks, but that night he could only feel his childhood rea ity stretching to a painful parameter hitherto unreached.

Then, from behind him, came the voice, so familiar to him, alo and yet so curiously stalwart.

There was no question that it was Langdon's aunt Thora.

"To get inside you have to see with the Eyes of the Spine..."

And with that phrase, the ever-growing sense of sight was oblite ated. Langdon felt himself spasm a single time. The motion wipe away basement and green light and hooded visitors.

Langdon's next memory was of waking up in his own bed as h mother pressed a cold compress against his fevered brow.

Within a month Langdon had already begun to spin a cocoon f himself that began to immunize him against whatever significance h encounter with the Votaries might have held. This immunization o curred so subtly that Langdon hardly noticed it. Being young, he w driven to distraction, by the flavours of comfort food and by Chris mas tinsel and by the canned laughter on television sitcoms. Lat these simple pleasures were overpowered by the exotic promise sex, later still by the allure of home and hearth.

The years passed and Langdon gradually found himself percei ing through a lens that hazed most things with a rosy wash and th filtered his memories through an equally pleasing mesh of positi nostalgia. Hormonal changes and improved nutrition had eliminate his boyhood torpor. By the time Langdon reached manhood he w so numb to the Votaries that he felt no memory of them whatsoeve

Perhaps this is understandable, for he was a married man now, li ing in a house of his own, one with a newly-thatched roof and a litt garden walkway paved with imported river rock. Copper pots hu from the kitchen walls and Nancy perfumed the foyer daily with fre potpourri of her own recipe.

Langdon knew how to keep order. It was all just a question of ca tion, of never allowing that foot to fall too heavily, as aunt Thora marble faun had warned (or possibly dared) him.

The order was all so very much Fated, so very much as it was mea to be.

Langdon kept apologizing profusely for being sick on the back lawn. Nancy would hear nothing of it and helped him into bed.

"You're burning up," she told him as her alabaster hand was pressed against his ruddy brow. "I think this is the first time I've ever seen you sick in all the years I've known you. I guess you're overdue."

"I guess," he replied. He shut his eyes and felt the illness pressing in all around him.

"I think I'll sleep for a bit," he told her.

"That's a good idea."

She left him.

The hot June day was made beige and gloomy as it filtered through the drawn curtains. It was the kind of illumination Langdon had known so well during his boyhood, when a never-ending cycle of ailments initiated him into an altered perspective on life.

It had been so long Langdon had almost forgotten what sickness felt like, the buoyant expansiveness, the vague sense that the world at large was somehow unreachable, the mind's gallery of images blossoming free as wildflowers in spring.

Drifting now, eyes shut, Langdon observed with mounting interest the environment that was flowering beneath him.

Lying on his back, he allowed his occulted eyes to open. His consciousness pressed through mattress and floorboards, down, down, until it hovered like a perched bird above the basement.

The Votaries were there, waiting for him. Langdon could not be sure, but there seemed to be a distinct air of reverence for him as he joined them.

Everything was softened by fever. His body was lying isolated in the bedroom while this other-self traipsed chambers that were stationed between memory and future, subjectivity and terra firma. All was as it should be.

He studied the Votaries, who bowed to him.

A wingback chair sat facing the far wall. The greenish fire from the furnace gave the impression of a regal woman seated in the furnishing

as though it were some kind of throne. Langdon was suddenly ove come with a joy so great his physical self began to sob. Had she bee teaching him something about his true lot in this world? And had h repaid her by embracing vulgar convention?

Shame shot through him. He willed himself nearer to aunt Thor but somehow his attention would not sway from the ash faggots lyir by the furnace. Langdon wondered if they were the ones from th yard. He watched as the Votaries in turn lifted each of the bundle boughs and fed them into the furnace. Two faggots remained, or of which was then retrieved by aunt Thora, who, the other-Langdo noted, was now masked in a similar pouch. Hers was of many c lours, first the black-red of stale clotted blood, then the milky lust of polished opal, then a shade of grey so banal it seemed to Langdo almost elegiac.

After aunt Thora's bundle had been slid into the furnace's green fir only one bundle of ash boughs remained. Beside it the axe gleame Langdon hesitated for a brief flash, wondering if he had the fortitud to meet this requisite.

The Votaries clustered in a semi-circle around the furnace.

At once they removed the hoods from their heads. There were r heads.

From the neck of one there sprouted a gnarled mandrake, from th second, a jawbone jutted up crookedly from the severed stump, th third was a smear of greenish light, like a candle flame.

The three magi of this secret faith reached upward to where Lan don's fleshless self loomed like sentient mist. The Votaries' gestur could have been either beseeching or reverential.

Langdon felt as though the sum of his life was being superheate until only the essential salts remained. The presence of his aunt, the Votaries, the verdant glimmer of the furnace, the cool dank pe fume of the neglected basement...they all radiated a significance, meaning, that was diamond-brilliant, diamond-hard. They coalesce to form a skeleton key, one that unlocked Langdon's existenc showed him that his all his endeavors and trials, all his passions an times of heartsickness or laughter were but a wayfaring from this, th occulted nerve-centre of his true life, the one that had been cracklir

secretly beneath the surface, like the vents that lie hidden in the floor.

Aunt Thora squatted down by the ash boughs, the axe held tightly in her spindly hands, waiting to birth her nephew into the sidereal garden she had tended all her life.

Nancy's attempts at CPR had been confused, panicked, and ultimately fruitless. Although the paramedics had arrived only a handful of minutes after she'd made the sputtering, shock-laden 911 call, they were unable to revive Langdon.

"He just had the flu," she kept telling them as they wheeled his covered body out of the house.

"Unfortunately these kinds of things sometimes happen," one of the medics had told her.

Lost, Nancy made the phone calls and answered questions.

It was very late in the night before loneliness finally sank its teeth into her. She was lying on the living room sofa, sobbing into the silent house.

When her cries were answered, Nancy shot upright, listening.

From somewhere below came the blast of a shrill trumpet. Distant and haunting, it sounded once and died.

Her back was to the living room window, yet Nancy's mind's eye saw the image so perfectly: a new and sickly-looking star was assuming its position in the boundless dark of true Night.

Turquoise on a Bed of Skulls

Patricia Cram

Worms know the way to bone,
and rain to river runs.
Love, you got to sink them teeth.

HEAVY LIGHT SMEARS itself into dirt. Meat steams thickly, wetting the walls of dented pots, fires darkening their undersides. Inside, oily meat falls from bones, taking on the thorned essence of chilies, salt straight from earth. Cinders circle, weaving unconcerned, resilient. The girl watches from the window the way she always does. Her eyes trace each current of the wind as it moves the market's smoke; her right arm rests bent in the sill, fingers absently stroking.

A hundred vendors shout out, their calls rising guttural and tired. Sun stings the eyes

and ages everything. Graying men lay pieces of metal on old linens—arrowheads, coins, nails, aged tools. From awning to awning, women hawk bundled flowers, bruised fruit, grains pounded fine. Beneath the girl's window, a group of men bustle around the fire old Cyprian made that morning. There is nothing special about this fire. What they want is hidden behind the enticement of an aged curtain. From her post above them, the girl can see all. Every day like this. The men are not allowed to peek, and in fact the black curtain is marred with holes cut only wide enough for hands to pass. One at a time, they reach in, sating their hands with Magdalena, turning and unfolding her, breasts swelling into their palms, her crevices seeming to open to their fingers as they trace, then pull hands out to smell. She smells good; the men smile. Every day like this. Cyprian works the barter, promises that once inside, they can taste, have their fill. Magdalena keeps her eyes closed, her face pointed to drink what the sky has to give her that day, her nose inhaling smoke and blue—not the hands of men. But soon comes a paying man. Cyprian passes him to Brasil, who turns his long neck to look upstairs at the girl, then opens the door and leads the man to the stairs. The girl leaves the window, and Magdalena stays below. Every day like this.

There is dancing, the cascade of bells. Cut glass takes on light equal to diamonds, silver, as if also cleaved from

the giving belly of the earth.
These voices are fast, rising,
but inside, we go slow.

Here, Magdalena goes nearly blind. Eyes full of shadows. Her muted gaze is the steadiest thing she can offer. She catches them there, where her quiet entices. She lets them imagine, then moves them into her skin. She could almost be a ghost, knocking on the walls. The men ignore the weight of this room.

She dances and makes sure they root hard, makes sure they leave something behind. When it is done, she stands with a rag and dries them both, catching their spit and seed. After they leave, she combs the room, picks hair, brushes dirt, then casts those sticky things into the latest bottle she has secretly pulled from the garbage downstairs. Seventeen bottles now. She cuts loose thread from those hardening rags, carefully fills the mouths of glass. Cultivates a stench that grows, where no drying air could persuade it to vanish.

There is a man who waits for her, but his waiting is a knife. Downstairs, outside her door, the unseen drawing near. There was a time when she knew a father, a mother, what memory made a golden morning daily. There were the tides of meals, father's lips offering her first words, brother's games filling a world. But one day, a man came, and they let him take her. To city of sun. To alleys of earth and rust. He gave her a room, called it a palace. Gave her beans and called it feast. She let her heart

fall to the cradle of her waist, above where men could reach, beneath what they could see. This man told her she would have to buy her own road home.

She holds what she can. Spits the seeds into the tatters she later cuts. Pieces of them, flakes of broken skin, their saliva caked into her tooth-marked shoulders. She stands, shakes. Brushes it down. Lets the sick hang out of her; clenches, releases, clenches, releases. Brings feeling back into her legs.

Loud city, so ripe it seems sour. The salt weight of all those bodies. Got to wash myself all night and day. These men sing old songs, work their burdens into me. I wipe their time right off my skin. Dry myself out. Got my own bottles now, Mama. They're full so I don't have to be. But I still have your bitter roots—their awful smell keeps me awake. You think you saved me from something worse than this.

I got a girl. A grave out there is full of her. I know where they put her in the ground. There's no name there, but I know. Rosaline. Think those men ever dream to visit you? They got hands full of you, too. Filled them-

selves so hard they had to use their fists to give you back. Where could you have run? Who would have kept you? Tell me where you were going. Tell me how to get there without meeting another soul along the way. Get me there alive, Rosaline. I got all these seeds for you.

It was a road of fire that carried Magdalena here. Mother would show no pain and busied herself with packing the girl's bag. Father was the one who led her to another man. He called her from the bedroom to introduce Cyprian, and much too slowly told her she would be leaving with the old man. Magdalena wilted, her fear standing in front of her, climbing inside every hole in her body. A full year had passed since they had been able to pay the rent for their land and the tiny home upon it. The fields refused to give, and there was no other way to make things right. The landlord had to call Cyprian. Magdalena's gaze dropped, looking almost like a nod as Cyprian gestured toward the landlord, handing him an envelope. The family would get another year. Young still and much too clean, the landlord thanked them as he went for the door, cash in his pocket. While her brother shed silent tears in the corner and her father watched the door, Magdalena focused on her mother. Head down, Mother approached. She kept one hand on her belly where her third child

grew, and she extended her other hand toward the girl. Magdalena tried to touch her, but Mother dropped the bag and turned. Magdalena's own belly swelled with bile.

Cyprian moved the girl. They drove slowly. Magdalena's eyes dried in the sun, fixed first to the withered earth of her dying town, then to the sweep of stones that followed. She kept her hand inside the bag her mother packed her, fingers around something held in glass. Turning and turning it, she breathed to the rhythm of its soft thuds. She was afraid to take it out in front of this man. Magdalena heard no road, her ears filled instead with the final click of the door locking behind her, then the dull slap of her mother's wailing, ringing out again and again against the back of her neck.

In the four hours it took to reach the city, Cyprian said nothing at all. The girl receded; the pounding of her heart took over. There had never been much for her. There were not many wild places in her dreams. But in the home she was leaving, there had been reasons, sometimes, for song. Where she was going, she knew, was a place that would silence her. She held on, worked to change her shape into one that could hold it all without shaking.

In this room, I am making stones. Sun cooks the mud and dust that falls; I pound the layers down. How many girls have lived here? I pound the layers down. There is filling, and there is rising. But there

is nothing at our sides, nothing approaching. Only above, below, long lines between. I am stretched to sky and under. I take what's earth and make it sky. Can't breathe too deep or I'll expand, break glass. I shake free the air with that fast breath. Quake the belly, fast inhale, retract. Balance their bones on my head. My breath in bursts to feed them. Could they ever see anything in front of them? Was there ever anything there?

Night sky feeds black to the flames of the earth. The market is quiet now, its heat subdued. Inside, Cyprian counts the day's earnings again and again. Only four paid today, and he worries his brow. Brasil puts more wood on the fire and stares into it while Magdalena clears the table, washes dishes. When she is done, the old man pushes his chair back. "Come here and let me smell you." She approaches, stands looking to the side of him as he lifts and inhales, says, "Is the stink of you keeping them away?" and turns her, bends her, inhales. But he finds in her no new stench, so asks, "Are you being good to our customers?" The girl nods, never meeting him. Cyprian sits back and exhales, "We need more girls. They're getting tired of the same skin." Brasil watches Magdalena from the fireplace. Wood splits, dropping embers. They all remain fixed until

Cyprian stands, suddenly, moments later. "Go to your rooms. Leave me be."

At the top of the stairs, Brasil looks to Magdalena; they nod before turning away.

Rosaline, you were here. This place always stinks of smoke. My hair smells of ashes, my teeth are rough. But you, they wanted the way you danced, wanted so much to keep a girl like you in a locked room. You remain. Your broken bones sing to me still. I imagine you that night. I breathe your screaming right into my lungs, let it pierce my stomach, peel down the scratches between my legs. Inside my legs look just like yours. All bruises, missing skin. I flatten my hands on my thighs and squeeze until the skin pales under my fingers. Push my palms hard and down. Our skin lives under other people's nails.

Twist now my mother's ring. Tiny chips of turquoise pushed into silver. All the things to think protective. Now I got you, girl. I got you a collection. We'll be the arrow that hits. Make a mess of them. Make them clean it up.

Below, Cyprian makes calls. He reads from his weathered list of numbers and asks about debts, families with daughters. He gets more numbers, and he keeps calling, recording total debts, addresses. Within two hours he has reached both of his hands into the belly of night, where fear makes briny lakes from gut to spine. He has been turned away by families enraged. He has been asked to wait by families who pray, who still carry hope that tides like these can turn. But by the end of those two hours, he has two new girls. He fumes about the money. He fumes about the drive. Outside of here, he will meet those families, he will pay their debts, and he will take their girls. They all know why, and they all know what will come. But as soon as they see Cyprian at their door, they go dark inside. They make something die.

Girl in dreams, I am the smoke in your eyes. I rub my fingers against your teeth. Feel my nails barely scrape your gums. I rub into you, spread you. The roof of your mouth goes flat; you sigh. Girl who rides, I oil your throat for you. As I slide down, I hold my arms above my head, slowly turning my neck clearing you with old serpent dance. When the throbbing of your heart pushes me, I reach out and find it like moon, so pitted, so pale. I drink from my own guts, something dark

for you, and this I spit. Over your heart drips now my thick fragrance. Girl who gives, feed in your dreams from this gristled trough. My hands cradle, reaching down. Consume you from belly and below, where we are tied. Make this girl not vanish, I sing. Let this girl outlive. Destiny, break between my gritted teeth. I loose new clots of meat from my palms. I breathe out the holes in her, exhale a calm. The place I would take you comes near, I sing. You have heard my chafing jewels clatter. You have worn the wet strings. We sing now the same song. Soon, we will be freed.

Dawn strikes suddenly with Cyprian at its side. The girl jerks to rising at the sight of his bloodshot eyes. It is clear he spent the night sleepless. Alcohol clouds him, makes a bull of him. "Something must be wrong with you," he spits, and rips the covers from her. She whimpers as he shoves her out of the way and pulls back the bedding. He looks under her pillow, sniffs it, takes her sheets into his hands, enraged and senseless, inhaling. "I smell something, girl. Something here makes me sick. What is it?" He looks around the room, pushes over a chair, opens her drawers and inhales from whatever he finds. She stays still on the bed, sitting on her knees, twisting her hands, but

ready to run. When finally he throws himself down to look beneath her bed, she gets up, leans against the wall by the door.

"What, you little pig!" he chokes as he pulls the bottles from their box beneath the bed. But when he finds them full, not of sweetened drinks, but of hair and scabs and things encrusted, he pushes the box violently and rises. "What have you been doing? You sick..." he rages toward her. She shrinks, but he gets her hair. "What is this?" She says nothing as he shoves her toward the box. He pushes her to kneeling, scratches the right side of her face on the edge of the box. "Magdalena! Remember Rosaline? Remember what happened to her?" The girl nods in what little room she has, shaking free new tears. "No one even knew who she was when they found her! Do you remember?" He digs his nails into her neck. "We only knew it was her because of her bracelets. Do you remember? They cut her face. They made a mess of her. Do you want me to put you out there, too? Do you want me to leave your fate on the street? She died like that! Is that what you want?"

"No," the girl whispers, barely moving, tears falling into the box. Cyprian lets go of her neck, kicks the box out from in front of her, kneeing her in the ribs.

"Get this trash out of here," he storms. The girl stops holding herself up, leans and falls over, arms wrapped around.

From splintered floor I thinl
of you. From splintered floo

I remember.

There were three of us then, and the other girl was the cruel one. She hoped that we would die something horrible. Wished the bad ones on us both. But you, you came into my room, night or day, the brave one. Older you, beautiful you. You knew that none of us chose. After the man who pulled so hard I lost hair. After the man who laughed as he ripped into the wrong hole. After the one who hit me, broke into my face. All these fires grazing my body. I have screamed a pyre into these pillows. I have masked my weeping with moans. Not one has known the difference. All these fires, in choked, smoldering parts. You showed me how to take them all, cut and fold them, put them down. Showed me how to break surfaces, move the rotten yolk between. Make the bottles work, you said. The bottles will make the stones so that we can stay as air.

That other girl got paid for. That other one hit the road. She went with a man who keeps her with others, his trifles. No one wanted us

like that, did they? Like this we are condemned. And so we are the ones they burn. I am lying on the floor again Rosaline. Now a fire thrives.

Brasil knocks lightly and comes in, few things in hand. He sighs at the sight of Magdalena on the ground. She is awake, her eyes just barely fixed to a point. Brasil puts his things down, then kneels and turns her face. Seeing only the streaks of tears, he is grateful there is no blood, no cuts to hide. With a wet rag, he wipes her face. The coldness comforts her, closes her eyes. He tells her, "Cyprian's gonna get more girls. It won't be just you anymore." He pulls her up by her arm, sliding her away from the box and leaning her against the bed. "He'll leave after he sleeps it off. He came raging at me, too. Told me about your bottles." Magdalena, eyes cast down, accepts a half-filled cup of water. She swallows as he tells her, "I think you scared him. You have to get rid of them. He'll throw you out." She nods, closes her eyes, both hands unmoving, surrounding the cup.

"Where are the others from?" she whispers.

"Not as far as you were. A couple hours each. He didn't tell me more."

"Will they be young?"

"He didn't say." Brasil gets to his feet, "We won't be working today. Just get rid of that stuff. I'll bring you more food later." Beside her, he leaves some bread, an orange, and

closes the door.

She pushes to kneeling and picks up the food. At the window, she digs her thumbs into the orange and begins pulling bits of pulp into her mouth. The sun is already high, its heat undulating off distant plateaus. Sounds from the market surround her as they rise. She stays there a long time.

This endless howling. These noisy, aching lives. No fire down there without us. Look around, seek us; there's no curtain, no filling those hands. No fire here without us.

We have much to give. There is no one, yet I am full.

Magdalena hears Cyprian leave, and then Brasil closing his door. She goes straight, silently, quickly, to the storage room, closing the door behind her. Tools and jars of food commingle, and she sifts carefully until she finds a hammer and a strong bag. The entire time, she thinks of fire, holds the burning. She lets her belly expand. She breathes to the bottom of her lungs.

Back in her room, she closes the door. She changes into a dirty dress, and then kneels with her bottles one by one. Before putting each into the bag, she studies it, shakes it, remembers and inhales anew. The stench of every deception escapes in brief gusts. She snorts and tilts her head back, over and over,

lodging hundreds of reeking things in her throat.

When every bottle has been moved, she reaches into the back of her tiny closet. Mother's bottle, smaller than the others and yellowed now by the years, fits into her palm. She shakes it again to remember, takes the lid off. She inhales and chokes back this thick, brittle dust. Nothing to protect anymore. Into the bag goes the final bottle; Magdalena gives the top a loose knot and sets it down.

Taking the cup Brasil brought her earlier, Magdalena slips into the hallway, then the bathroom. She turns on the sink and fills the cup, drinks deeply. She fills the cup again, drinks again, imagines it gasoline.

In her room, she makes the bag quiet. She slings it steadily over her shoulder and takes each silent step downstairs with flames beneath her feet. She goes out the door, dimming herself to go unseen. Only smoke senses its brethren and moves to follow.

Long path to you now. They always put boneyards at the outskirts, but you they cast even further out.

All the souls in the market rattle against one another just beads colliding, so thin so tenuous. This ground is a rough tongue numbed by empty words. Their feet rub the haunted channels. I walk on the last stones that will

keep me from falling in. Outside, stay outside.

From deep within the earth does rise a valiant fire. From feet do climb twin pyres. Ascend my bones and spread your fingers out. Reach into tendon, push into skin, extend. These thighs distend. In my hips do turn pitch black and swell. Mark me from within.

The ground over the grave is dry, the plants that emerge above it all yellow. The marker Magdalena left for her, a simple pile of stones, is undisturbed. No one is near; no one has lately been behind these meager trees.

Magdalena sets the bag down and spreads it out upon the ground. She reaches into her dress, pulls out the hammer, and then stretches her arm up over her head. Holding her breath, she strikes repeatedly down. From the crash of disintegration, a joyful splintering extends across her face, and she exhales in rough wonder. She beats down until every bottle is emptied from within, innards crumbled, powdered, no thing left intact.

Beside this, Magdalena lies again upon the ground. She fans her hair out, spreads her fingers, keeps her palms touching earth. She looks up into the sky until her eyes water and close on their own.

Sun moves across the backs of her hands before she rises. Her legs have been held together so tightly that they sting when she

stands. She takes her bag, works the knot out, and upends scab and glass and fabrics stiffened, cut. The grave is covered. "Rosaline," she breathes. Magdalena lifts her skirt, lets pour her water. The wet stream of heat and dust united awakens a new scent, so pungent Magdalena laughs. When she is emptied, she kneels, thighs apart, holding herself just above the vapors that surge to meet her skin.

In, climb in, make sores. In herein, no organ denies you Blister where you land. Dig and make the fire that can not die. This torch of pus This blazing fountain sick Hold nothing back. Destroy and plague. Dig in and banes do make. But smell good for them. Smell like center of earth, like my arms reaching into paradise and eclipsing first light. Keep them coming. Keep them coming back for more.

Digs with hammer's claw and buries glass, bag, remains. Knees wiped off. Hair shaken clean. Back through the market. Back through the door. Silence. Magdalena smiles, goes upstairs to feel her center decompose.

Finally, in front of me—I see

The Spider

Hanns Heinz Ewers
TRANSLATED BY JOE E. BANDEL

THREE PEOPLE HAD hung themselves in the window of room #7 in the little hotel Stevens on three successive Fridays when medical student Richard Brocquemont resolved to move in.

The first was a Swiss travelling salesman. They found his body Saturday evening. The doctor determined that his death must have occurred between five and six o'clock on Friday evening. The corpse hung on a strong hook that had been driven into the crossbar of the window serving as a place to hang clothes. The window was closed; the deceased had used the curtain cord as a noose. Because the window was very low his legs lay on the floor with his knees almost touching as well. A strong will or purpose must have certainly driven the suicide.

It was further determined that he was married and the father of four children. He had a good job, a cheerful disposition and was always an entertaining character to be around. There was nothing found on his body, not even a note. Yet no one had ever heard him mention anything that would indicate a reason for his suicide.

The second case was not much different. The performer Karl Krause had been hired as a cyclist stuntman for the nearby Médrano circus. He moved into room #7 two days later. When he didn't show for the performance that Friday the director sent a show attendant to the hotel. He found the performer in the open room hanging from the crossbar of the window.

All of the details were the same in both cases. This suicide appeared no less mysterious. The popular performer received a high wage and everything he needed. He was a young man, twenty-five years old, his life was in full bloom and he enjoyed it. In this case as well there was no note, no insidious remark that might have hinted at a reason for the suicide. He was survived by his old mother to whom he had punctually sent 300 Marks on the first of every month for her care and livelihood.

For Mrs. Dubonnet, the owner of the reasonable little hotel, most of her clients were from the nearby Montmartre vaudeville troop. This second strange death in one of her rooms had very unpleasant consequences. Soon these guests left and the regular ones didn't come back.

She turned to her personal friend, the commissioner of the 9th Precinct. He told her that he would do everything in his power to help her. He not only investigated the suicides of both hotel guests; he also placed an officer in the room at her disposal.

Charles-Maria Chaumié volunteered for the job of his own free will. He was an old "Marsouin", marine infantryman, with eleven years of service, had been a sergeant at Tonkin and Annam. He had spent many nights at lonely posts, shot greetings from out of the bushes at sneaking, cowardly river pirates. He appeared completely suitable to confront the "ghost" of Rue Alfred Stevens that everyone was talking about.

The room was prepared for him and he moved in on Sunday evening, then lay down to sleep very contented after the meal and drinks the worthy Mrs. Dubonnet had so amply provided. Every morning and evening Chaumié went to the police precinct to make his report. In the first days these were very limited. He explained that he had not noticed much to report.

Wednesday, on the other hand, he believed he had found a clue. When pressed to say more, he pleaded to be silent just a little while longer. He had no idea whether what he had discovered really had anything at all to do with the deaths of the two people in any way and was afraid that he would be made fun of and laughed at.

On Thursday his behavior was a little uncertain, yet serious. He had

nothing further to report. On Friday morning he was considerably excited. He indicated half laughing, half-serious that the window, in any case, had a strange power of attraction. Nevertheless he would continue to stay there, it was absolutely in no way connected with the suicides and people would only laugh at him if he said anymore.

He didn't come to the precinct that evening. They found him hanging on the hook of the window crossbar. Here too all the evidence was the same as in the other cases down to the last detail, the legs dangling off the floor, the curtain cord used as a noose. The window was shut, the door unlocked. The death occurred around six o'clock in the evening. The mouth of the deceased was open with the tongue hanging out.

This third death in room #7 had very serious consequences, that same day each and every guest left hotel Stevens with the exception of the German schoolteacher in room #16. He used the opportunity to lower his rent to a third of what he had been paying.

It was a small consolation for Mrs. Dubonnet when Mary Garden, star of the opera, *Comique*, drove up in her Renault one day and bargained for the red curtain cord. She got it for 200 Francs only because she had seen them in the newspaper by luck. If these things had happened in the summer, in July or August, Mrs. Dubonnet would have gotten three times as much for her curtain cord. Entire sections of the paper would have been filled for weeks with this stuff. But this season was filled with Wahlen, Morocco, Persia, the bank crash in New York and not less than three important political affairs.

Really, you scarcely knew how to get to the place from the papers. The result was that the affair at Rue Alfred Stevens was not talked about as much as it should have been. Further, the articles were taken from the police reports, concise, short, objective and fairly free from exaggeration.

These articles were the only things that medical student Richard Bracquemont knew of the matter. There was one other little fact that he didn't know; it appeared so immaterial that neither the commissioner nor any of the eyewitnesses had told the reporters about it. It only came out later after the adventure of the medical student, and then they remembered it.

It was simply that when the police took the corpse of Sergeant Charles-Maria Chaumnié down from the window crossbar a large black spider crawled out of his open mouth. The hotel servant flicked it away with his finger.

"Phui," he cried. "That's a big devil!"

Later in the investigation, the one of Bracquemont, a witness said that as they took down the corpse of the Swiss travelling salesman a similar spider had been seen running across the dead man's shoulder.

But Richard Bracquemont knew nothing of that. He took the room two weeks after the last suicide on a Sunday. Then he scrupulously wrote down what he experienced there in his journal.

THE JOURNAL OF MEDICAL STUDENT
RICHARD BRACQUEMONT

Monday 28 February

I moved in here yesterday evening. I unpacked my two suitcases, put my things in order a little, and then I went to bed. I had an excellent sleep and woke up at exactly nine o'clock by someone knocking on my door. It was the owner, herself, bringing me breakfast. She was concerned for me, you could tell by the eggs, the bacon and the excellent coffee that she brought me. Then I washed up, dressed and watched as a maid made up the room. After that I smoked my pipe.

Well, now I'm here. I know very well that this may be dangerous but I also know that if successful I will have it made. Once you could find a reasonably priced meal in Paris but no more today! Indeed it is well worth it to set aside this bit of my life for play. This is my chance and I will take it.

By the way, there were others with the same idea that found out about it. Not less than twenty-seven people have tried, have appealed to the police and to the landlady to get the room. In addition there were three ladies downstairs as well. That was more than enough competition, they were probably all poor devils like myself.

But I got the job. Why? Ah, I was probably the only one there that could give the police a plan! Naturally it was a bluff.

Yes, these reports are most decidedly for the police and they are fun for me as well. Right at the beginning I want to say I played a little trick on them. If the commissioner is sensible he will read this and say, "Hmm, straight to the point. It appears that Bracquemont is just what we need!"

I don't really care what he says when he reads this later. But right now I'm sitting here and it appears to be a good omen to begin by telling how I so thoroughly bluffed these gentlemen.

First I went to Mrs. Dubonnet, she sent me to the police precinct. I loitered around there every day for an entire week; my offer was always "being considered". I was always told that I should come back again the next morning. Most of my competitors had long since given up, had something better to do than wait for hours in the musty guardroom. The commissioner was getting annoyed over my stubbornness. Finally he categorically told me that there was no need for me to keep coming back. He thanked me like he had all the others for my good will, but said they had absolutely no use for "dilettante laymen". Now if I only had some kind of operations plan worked out—

That's when I told him that I did have such a plan. Naturally I didn't have one and couldn't explain a word of it to him, but I told him that my plan was a good one even if a bit dangerous and could indeed find the solution. Unlike the activity of his officer, I would not keep information to myself and deliver any relevant information to him personally.

He thanked me again and was about to dismiss me when he asked if I couldn't give him a little hint of what my plan was. I knew I was in way over my head, so I told him a bunch of blooming nonsense that I made up on the spot. I don't know where all of these strange thoughts suddenly came from.

I told him that of all the hours of the week there was one with a strange mysterious influence. That was the hour that Christ vanished from his tomb and descended into hell. It was six o'clock in the evening of the last day of the Jewish week. I reminded him that it was during this hour on Friday between five and six o'clock that all three

of the suicides had occurred. I couldn't tell him any more than that right then, but hinted he might refer to the Revelations of St. John. The commissioner made a face as if he knew what I was talking about, thanked me and ordered me to come back in the evening.

I stepped punctually into his office. Before him on the table I saw the New Testament lying open. Earlier I, like him, had been reading through Revelations and hadn't understood a single syllable of it. Perhaps the commissioner was more intelligent than I was; in any case he was very obliging and told me that despite my very vague hints he believed he understood what I meant to do. He was prepared to let me go forward with my wishes and give me any help I might need.

I must acknowledge that he has been very helpful to me. He made the arrangement with the landlady, so that during the duration of my stay at the hotel everything would be free. He gave me an excellent revolver and a police whistle. The patrolmen on duty have been directed to go through Rue Alfred Stevens often and come to my aid at the slightest sign of trouble. But the most important thing is that he had a telephone installed in the room with which I could stay in direct contact with the police precinct. It is scarcely four minutes away and I can have help quickly at any time. With all of these things I have no reason to be afraid.

Tuesday 1 March

Nothing happened either yesterday or today. Mrs. Dubonnet had a new curtain cord brought in from a different room. The window has stood empty long enough. She uses any opportunity at all to check in on me. Each time she brings something else along.

I still have nothing to relate in regards to the cause of the suicides, but nothing new has happened. Mrs. Dubonnet has her own opinion. She believes that what happened with the performer was due to an unlucky love affair. A young lady had been coming to visit him this past year but Mrs. Dubonnet had not seen her anymore lately. She didn't really know what led to the traveling salesman's resolve. She couldn't know everything. But the sergeant had most certainly com-

mitted suicide just to make her mad!

I must say that this explanation by Mrs. Dubonnet seems a little inadequate. But I keep quiet and let her chatter; after all, she breaks up my boredom.

Thursday 3 March

Still nothing at all, like always. The commissioner calls a few times every day. I tell him that everything is going excellently with me. It is obvious that he is not entirely satisfied with this information. I've sent for my books on medicine and can study them now. My voluntary imprisonment will serve a purpose in any case.

Friday 4 March, two o'clock in the afternoon

I had an excellent lunch at noon; my hostess brought me half a bottle of champagne to go along with it. It was truly a condemned man's last meal. She considers me already three-quarters dead. Before she left, she cried and begged me to go with her. She was afraid that I would hang myself "just to make her mad!".

I have made an exhaustive examination of the curtain cord. Will I hang myself with it? Hmm, I feel little inclination to do so. The cord is coarse and hard, pulls very poorly in the noose. I would really have to try hard to follow the examples of the others.

Now I'm sitting at my desk, on my left is the telephone, on my right lies the revolver. I am not at all afraid, but I am curious.

Six o'clock in the evening

Nothing has happened, except what I've already written. Unfortunately! The fateful hour has come and gone. It was like all the others. Well, really I can't lie. Several times I did feel the compulsion to go to the window, oh yes, but for a different reason!

The commissioner called on the phone at least ten times between five and six o'clock. He is as impatient as I am. But Mrs. Dubonnet is delighted. Someone has lived for an entire week in room #7 without hanging themselves. Fabulous!

Monday 7 March

I am now convinced that I will not find anything and also inclined to believe the suicides of my predecessors were only due to curious coincidence. I have pleaded with the commissioner to take up an even more exhaustive investigation into the motives behind the three deaths. I am certain such reasons will finally be found.

How this concerns me is that I want to stay here as long as possible. It is not Paris, but I live here for nothing, have regular meals and ample time for my studies. I need to finish my report for the commissioner and finally there is one other reason why I want to stay here.

Wednesday 9 March

Well, I am one step closer. Clarimonde—

Oh, I've not yet mentioned Clarimonde. She is the "third reason" I want to stay here. She is also the reason I wanted to go to the window at the fateful hour, but certainly not to hang myself.

Why do I call her that? I have no idea what her name really is but to me she is Clarimonde. I would like to bet that when I do finally ask her name sometime, that is what it will be.

I noticed Clarimonde right away in the very first days. She lives on the other side of the very small street and her window is right across from mine. She sits there behind her curtain.

By the way, I must establish that she noticed me earlier as well and visibly showed an interest in me. No wonder, the entire street knows that I live here and why. Mrs. Dubonnet has already taken care of that.

I have never had an inclination to fall in love and have had very

few interactions with women. When you leave Verdun and come to Paris to study medicine with barely enough money for three meals a day, then you need to think about something other than love. I don't have much experience in these things and have perhaps made a stupid start, but she is still there. I must please her.

In the beginning I had no intention of engaging in a relationship with my opposite across the street. I only thought that since I was here to observe, and since there was nothing to observe in my room, I might just as well observe her. You can't sit all day long poring over books.

I've determined that Clarimonde apparently lives alone in the little apartment. She has three windows, but only sits at the one that is across from mine. She sits there and spins on a little old fashioned distaff. I have seen something like it once at my grandmother's but she never used it herself. She inherited it from some old aunt. I didn't know that anyone still used them today.

By the way, Clarimonde's distaff is a very small, dainty thing. It is white, apparently made out of ivory and the thread she makes with it must be frightfully delicate. She sits there behind the curtain working incessantly for the entire day. She only stops when it begins to grow dark. These foggy days it gets dark quite early in the narrow streets. There is a beautiful sunset around five o'clock already. I have never seen a light in her room.

What does she look like? Well, I don't really know. She wears her black hair in wavy curls and her face is quite pale. Her nose is narrow and small. Her nostrils flare like wings. Her lips are pale as well and it appears to me that her teeth are pointed, like predators'. Her eyelids have deep shadows but when she opens them, her large dark eyes glow. Yet this is all something I feel rather than know. It is hard to see anyone clearly behind a curtain.

There is one other thing; she always wears a black gown with the collar tightly buttoned. It has large lilac polka dots on it and she also wears long black gloves to protect her hands while she works. It looks strange, how her narrow black fingers quickly take the thread and pull it through each other-almost like the legs of an insect.

What is our relationship with each other? It is currently only a

casual, surface relationship, yet it seems to me that it is getting much deeper. It began like this: she looked through my window and saw me and I looked through hers. She observed me and I observed her. She must have liked what she saw because one day as I looked back at her, she laughed. Naturally I laughed too. It went on like that for a couple of days, always a little more often and always more laughing together.

Almost hourly I feel compelled to greet her. I truly don't know what restrains me and holds me back. Finally I did it, today at noon, and Clarimonde greeted me back! It was hardly noticeable, but I saw it, saw how she nodded back to me.

Thursday 10 March

I sat over my books for a long time yesterday. I can't truthfully say that I got much studying done. I built castles in the air and dreamed of Clarimonde. I hadn't slept very well until late in the morning. When I stepped up to the window Clarimonde was sitting there. I greeted her and she nodded back. She laughed and looked at me for a long time.

I wanted to study but found no peace. I sat by the window and stared over at her. I saw how her hands lay in her lap. I pulled the white curtain back with the cord and at almost the same instant she did the same. We laughed and looked at each other. I believe we must have spent an hour sitting like that. Then she started spinning again.

Saturday 12 March

This day is gone. I ate and drank, I sat at my desk, and then I smoked my pipe and bent over a book. But I didn't read a single syllable. I tried again and again but knew ahead of time that it was no use. Then I went to the window, greeted Clarimonde. She thanked me; we laughed and stared at each other for hours.

Yesterday afternoon around six o'clock was a little disturbing. Dusk came quite early and I felt a certain fear. I sat at my desk and waited. I felt an almost uncontrollable urge to go to the window, not to hang

myself, really, but instead to see Clarimonde. I sprang up and stood behind the curtain. Never had I been able to see so perfectly even though it was already dark. She was spinning but her eyes looked over at me. I felt a curious sense of well-being and a slight fear as well. The phone rang. I was enraged that the commissioner had torn me out of my dream with his foolish questions.

This morning he visited me, together with Mrs. Dubonnet. They are satisfied with my activity; it is enough that I have now survived for two weeks in room #7. Yet the commissioner wants more information. I had made mysterious comments and he wants answers. I said that I was hot on the trail of something and the ass believed every word.

In any case I can stay here one week longer, and that is my only wish, not because of Mrs. Dubonnet's food and drink. Good God! How quickly we become indifferent to these things when we are always satisfied! No, it is because of her window, the one that she hates and fears, the one that I love so much, the one that shows me Clarimonde.

When the lamps are lit I can't see her anymore. I've kept watch to see if she ever goes out, but have never seen her on the street.

I have a large comfortable easychair and a lamp with a green shade over it. I keep warm and comfortably wrapped up. The commissioner brought me a large pack of tobacco; I have never smoked in such luxury. And yet, despite all this I can't study. I read two or three pages and when I get to the end I haven't understood a single word. My eyes read the letters but my brain refuses to find any meaning in them.

Funny! It's as if a sign said: Entry Forbidden! As if no other thought were allowed than one—Clarimonde. I finally shoved the book away, leaned back deeply in my chair and dreamed.

Sunday 13 March

This morning I saw a little performance. I went out into the hallway and waited while the maid was cleaning my room. In front of the little hall window hung a spiderweb. A fat Cross spider sat on it. Mrs. Du-

bonnet wouldn't allow them to be taken away. Spiders bring "luck" and she already had enough "bad luck" in her house.

Then I saw how another smaller spider cautiously ran around the net, a male. It carefully stepped a little way onto a quivering thread and moved toward the middle. The female moved, snapping the thread and pulling it back quickly to herself. The male ran to another thread and tried again to get closer.

Finally the strong female in the middle of the web consented to his courtship and didn't move anymore. The male plucked a strand lightly at first, then harder until the entire web trembled but the object of his worship remained motionless. He went there quickly and was infinitely more cautious the closer he got. The female received him quietly and unmoving, surrendering entirely, falling into his amorous embrace. They hung motionless for long minutes in the center of the web.

Then I saw how the male slowly freed himself, one leg at a time. It was as if he wanted to draw back and leave his companion alone in the afterglow of their lovemaking. Suddenly he was free and ran as quickly as possible to edge of the web. At the same moment the female quickly came to life and wildly chased him down. The weak male was lowering himself down onto a thread as his beloved caught up to him.

Both fell onto the windowsill as he struggled with all of his might to escape. It was too late. He was already trapped in the powerful grip of his companion. She carried him back onto the web, back to the middle, to the same place, that had just served as a bed for their voluptuous desire. Now it appeared much differently.

The lover struggled in vain, reaching his weak legs out again and again in an effort to escape this wild embrace. His beloved would not let him go. In a few minutes she spun a cocoon around him so tightly that he couldn't move a single limb. Then she sank her sharp pinchers into his body and sucked in full pulls the young blood of her beloved.

I saw then how she finally cut loose the miserable, unrecognizable lump, legs, skin and thread and contemptuously threw it out of the net. That is how love is with these creatures. I'm glad I'm not a boy spider.

Monday 14 March

I don't even look at my books any more. I just spend my days at the window. When it gets dark I still sit there. She is not there, but I close my eyes and then I see her.

Hmm, this journal has really become something much different than what I thought it would be. It tells of Mrs. Dubonnet and the commissioner, of spiders and of Clarimonde. But there is not one syllable about the discovery I wanted to make. What can I write instead?

Tuesday 15 March

We have discovered an unusual game, Clarimonde and I. We play it all day long. I greet her, immediately she greets me back. Then I drum with my hand against the windowpane. She scarcely sees it before she begins drumming as well. I nod to her, she nods back. I move my lips as if I'm speaking to her and she does the same. Then I stroke the hair back on my temples and her hand is on her forehead as well. It is a true child's game and we both laugh over it.

That is to say, she doesn't really laugh, it is more of a smile that she gives, looking exactly like I believe my own does. This, by the way, is not as simple as it seems. It is not only a pure imitation, a form of play, but a form of communication as well. Clarimonde follows my movements and in the smallest fraction of a second replies. She hardly has time to see and sometimes it appears to me as if we are both doing it at the same time.

That's what is so fascinating to me, there is always something new, something unforeseen and she copies it! It is staggering how she can make the same movements at the same time. Sometimes I try to fool her. I make a lot of different movements, one right after the other. Then do the same moves again and again in a pattern. Finally I follow the same pattern but make a small change in the order of the movements or make a different one, or leave one out. It's just like how the children play "Simon Says".

What is incredible is that Clarimonde never once makes a wrong

move, even though I alternate so quickly that she scarcely has time to recognize a single movement.

That's how I spend my day but I don't for a second feel that I'm uselessly wasting my time. On the contrary, it seems as if I have never done anything as important.

Wednesday 16 March

It is funny that I've never seriously thought about my relationship with Clarimonde on a rational basis. What does it mean? All these hours of play? Last night I thought about it, deliberated over it. I could simply take up my hat and coat, go down two flights of stairs five steps across the street, back up two flights of stairs again to be at her door. There would be a small sign on it that says "Clarimonde _" Clarimonde what? I don't know her last name but Clarimonde would be on it. I would knock on the door and then—

I can imagine everything perfectly up to that point, every small movement that I make. I can see it all right before my eyes. But I can't see at all what happens next. The door opens, I see that much. But I stay in the hallway looking into the dark room. It is so dark you can see absolutely nothing at all. She doesn't come—doesn't come. There is nothing there at all, only the black impenetrable darkness.

Sometimes I wonder if there is another Clarimonde other than the one that sits at the window and plays with me. I can not imagine at all what this woman would look like in a hat or a different dress other than the black one with the lilac polka dots on it. I can't even imagine her without gloves. If I saw her on the street or even in a restaurant eating, drinking and chatting, I would burst out laughing. The image appears so impossible to me.

Sometimes I wonder if I love her. I can't answer truthfully; I've never been in love. Is the feeling that I have for Clarimonde really love? Or is it something entirely different. It's not something I've learned about from my companions or from a book. It is very difficult to express my feelings. In general, it is very difficult to think about anything that doesn't include Clarimonde and even more, include our game.

I can't lie. It is our game that apparently always occupies me, nothing else. I understand at least that much. Clarimonde, yes, I feel attracted to her, but mixed with that is another feeling, as if I'm afraid. Afraid? No, that's not quite right. It is more of shyness, a light anxiety about something. I don't really know what.

It is precisely this anxiety, this strange restraint, this voluptuous sensuality that keeps me away from her and becomes stronger the closer I get. It is as if I am running in a wide circle around her, coming in a little closer, then pulling back again, running further, trying again from another place and quickly backing away again, until I finally—and this I most certainly know—until I finally go to her.

Clarimonde sits by the window and spins thread, long, infinitely fine thread. She's making a web out of it. I don't know what it is for, and I don't understand how she can make her delicate net without ever tangling or ripping the delicate threads. Her fine work contains fairytale animals and remarkable little monkeys.

What did I just write? The truth is that I can't exactly see what she spins, the threads are much too fine. Yet I know exactly what she is making when I see her with my eyes closed. It is a large net with many creatures in it, fairytale animals and remarkable little monkeys.

Thursday 17 March

I am in a strange impulsive mood. I don't speak with people anymore. I scarcely say good morning to the maid or even to Mrs. Dubonnet herself. I hardly take the time to eat. I just want to sit by the window and play games with her. It's the excitement of the game, really, that's what it is. I have the feeling that something will happen tomorrow.

Friday 18 March

Yes, yes, something will happen today. I told myself ahead of time—made a loud speech to myself—to hear my own voice—reminded myself of why I am here. The bad thing is that I'm afraid and this fear

that I will end up like my predecessors in this room mixes strangely together with my other fear, my fear of Clarimonde. I can scarcely stay away from her. I am afraid. I want to scream.

Six o'clock in the evening

A few quick words in hat and jacket. At five o'clock I was at the end of my wits. Oh, I know now that it has most certainly something to do with this fateful sixth hour of the last day of the week. I don't laugh anymore at the nonsense I told the commissioner.

I sat at my chair clutching my revolver, but the window pulled at me, almost tore at me. I wanted to play with Clarimonde but had this horrible fear of the window. I saw them hanging there, the fat Swiss merchant with his thick neck and gray stubble beard, the slender performer and the stocky powerful sergeant. I saw all three of them one after the other, and then all three of them together on the same hook with open mouths and protruding tongues. Then I saw myself in the midst of them.

Oh, the fear! I knew that just like them, I had stood in front of the crossbar and the horrible hook looking through the window at Clarimonde. May she forgive me, but it's true. In my tangled fear I always placed her in the picture with the other three. The ones that hung there, legs deeply dragging on the floor.

The truth is that I felt no wish or desire to hang myself, that wasn't my fear. It was only a fear of the window itself and of Clarimonde- of something terrible, unknown, that was just about to happen. I had the passionate uncontrollable impulse to stand up and go to the window. I had to do it—

Then the phone rang. I picked up the receiver and screamed into it before I could hear a word.

"Come over here, Come over here now!"

It was as if the shrill cry of my voice had instantly chased the last scratching shadows under the floorboards. I was instantly at peace, wiped the sweat from my forehead and drank a glass of water. Then I deliberated about what I should tell the commissioner when he came.

Finally I went to the window, greeted her and smiled. Clarimonde greeted me back and smiled.

Five minutes later the commissioner was there. I told him that I had finally found the basis of the suicides. I didn't want to answer any questions that night but I would certainly in a very short time reveal the entire remarkable story to him.

The funny thing is that even as I lied to him, I knew that I was telling the truth. I could almost grasp the answer but it still eluded me. He immediately noticed my calm composure, especially since I had just screamed fearfully into the telephone. I apologized, said that I knew he would naturally like an explanation but I didn't have all the pieces put together yet.

He was amiable about it, said I should not let it bother me that I called him. He was always at my disposal, that was his duty. He would much rather come a dozen times in vain than not be called the one time when it was needed.

Then he invited me to go out with him that evening. It would be a diversion. It was not good that I spent so much of my time alone. I gave in—that is to say I accepted. It didn't seem right to me. I didn't really want to step out of the room.

Saturday 19 March

We went to the Gaieté Rochechouart, the Cigale and the Lune Rousse. The commissioner was right. It was good for me to get out of there, breathe different air. In the beginning I was uncomfortable, felt like I was doing something wrong, as if I was a deserter, had turned my back on the flag. But then the feeling went away. We drank a lot, laughed a lot and chatted.

This morning as I went to the window I believed I saw reproach in Clarimonde's look. Perhaps I only imagined it. How could she possibly know that I went out last night? Besides, it only lasted a moment, and then she laughed again. We played together all day long.

Sunday 20 March

I can only write again that we played all day long.

Tuesday 21 March

Yes, and we did it again today as well, nothing, absolutely nothing else. At times I literally ask myself, "For what purpose? Why? What do I really want? Where will this all lead?"

But I never have any answers. What is certain is that I don't want anything else, only this. Whatever comes out of it, well, I must wait and see.

We speak with each other now in these days. Not by speaking out loud, sometimes we just move our lips; more often we just communicate by looking at each other. We understand each other very well. I was right. Clarimonde did reproach me because I ran away last Friday night. I asked for her forgiveness, said that I understood, it was stupid of me, and I have promised to never again want to leave this window. We kissed, pressing our lips for a long time on the windowpanes.

Wednesday 23 March

I know now that I love her. It must be so; she permeates me to the last fiber. The love of other people might be different but is the head, the ear, the hand, of each person the same as millions of others? No love is the same either. Especially my love, I know that for certain. But is it any less beautiful because it is different?

I am very fortunate in this love. If only it weren't for the fear! Sometimes it sleeps, then I forget it. But then it wakes up again in minutes and won't leave me alone. It comes to me like a paltry mouse that fights against a large beautiful snake, trying to wrest itself from the snake's powerful embrace. Just wait, you stupid little fear, soon this great love will devour you.

Thursday 24 March

I've made a discovery! I'm not playing with Clarimonde. She's playing with me. This is how I found out. Yesterday evening I was thinking as usual about our game. I wrote down five new complicated series of movements wanting to surprise her with them in the morning. Each movement had its own number. I practiced doing them as quickly as possible, both forwards and backwards. Then I practiced them by only looking at the numbers. Then I practiced the ones I missed. Finally I practiced all the first and last movements of all five series. It was very laborious, but it made me very happy because they would bring me that much closer to Clarimonde the next time I saw her. I practiced for hours until it went like clockwork.

This morning I went to the window, we greeted each other and began the game. There and back, over and across, it was unbelievable how quickly she understood me, how she responded with her own movements in almost the same instant.

Then there was a knock at the door. It was the house servant bringing my boots back. I took them from him and was going back to the window when my glance fell on the piece of paper with my notes on it. That's when I realized that I had not done a single one of the new movements.

I staggered and nearly fell. I grabbed the back of the chair to keep from falling. I didn't believe it, looked at the paper again and again. It was true, I had been playing an entire series of new movements at the window and not one of them was mine. Again I had the feeling that a door was opening wide, her door. I was standing in front of it, staring inside- nothing, nothing, only the empty darkness.

I knew then that if I left I could still save myself. I perceived that I was free to go. Instead I stayed. It was because I was convinced that I was now holding the solution to the mystery solidly in both hands. "Paris! I could conquer Paris! I would be famous! For that small moment Paris was stronger than Clarimonde.

But now I scarcely even think of it any more. Now I only feel my love for her and this quiet, sensuous fear. But that moment gave me strength. I read through my first series of movements and did each one

of them perfectly. Then I went back to the window. I noticed exactly what I was doing. None of the movements were the ones I wanted to do! Then I gave her the finger, but I kissed the windowpane instead. I wanted to drum on the window but I ran my fingers through my hair.

Clarimonde was certainly not doing what I did. I was doing what she did, and doing it so quickly, so lightning fast, that they almost happened at the same second. What I had believed to be true was now delusion and my own will appeared to be gone.

I had been so proud of my ability to influence her and manipulate her, when it was I, myself, that was being influenced and manipulated! Only the influence was so subtle, so weak, that it gave no hint of its existence. It was so soothing.

I made one more attempt. I put both hands in my pockets, steeling myself not to move. Then I looked over at her. I saw how she raised her hand, how she laughed lightly while giving me the finger. I didn't move. I felt how my right hand tried to pull itself out of my pocket but I clutched the fabric tightly. Slowly after a few moments my fingers loosened by themselves. My hand came out of the pocket and raised itself. I gave her the finger and laughed.

It was as if I wasn't doing it, it was some stranger instead. I was only observing. No, no. That wasn't it! I, I was doing it and some stranger was observing me. It was a strong stranger that was making a great discovery, but it wasn't me! What discovery had I made? I was just there to do what she wanted, Clarimonde, whom I loved with such a delicious fear.

Friday 25 March

I cut the telephone cord. I have no desire to be once more disturbed by the commissioner when the fateful hour comes.

Dear God! What did I just write? Not one word of it is true. It is as if someone other than myself is moving the writing quill.

But I will, will, will write all of this down in my journal. Write what is true. I am reluctant and it requires an immense effort, but I will do it. I will do just this one last thing.

I cut the telephone cord, well, because I had to. There it is, finally! Because I had to, had to—

This morning we stood at the window and played. The game was different than yesterday. She would make some move and I would resist as long as I could. But I finally had to give in, do what she wanted without any will of my own. I can't tell you how wonderful and desirable a feeling it is, this surrender, this giving in to her will.

We were playing and then suddenly she stood up and went back into her room. It was so dark I couldn't see her any more. She seemed to have disappeared into the darkness. Soon she came back, carrying a desk telephone in both hands just like mine.

She laughed, set it down on the windowsill, took a knife, cut through the cord, and then carried it back again. I fought with myself for a quarter of an hour. My fear was larger than it was before, but so was the delicious feeling of slowly succumbing to her will. Finally I picked up my telephone, cut through the cord and placed it back again on the desk.

So, it's going to happen.

I'm sitting at my desk, I've already had my tea, and the house servant is just now taking the plates and dishes away. I asked him what time it was; my own clock has not been working right. It is fifteen minutes after five o'clock, fifteen minutes after five o'clock.

I know that when I look at her next, Clarimonde will do something. She will do something and I will have to do it also. I can see her now. She stands there and laughs. Now—

If only I could look away! Now she goes to the curtain—she takes up the cord. It is red- exactly like the one in my window. She makes a noose. She hangs the cord over the hook on the window crossbar. She sits there and laughs.

No, you can't call it fear anymore, this thing I am feeling. It is a horrible anguish, a terror that I would not exchange for anything in the world. It is a compulsion so unheard of in its own way and yet so strangely sensuous in its inescapable cruelty.

I could easily run over there and do what she wants. But I wait, fight, and resist. I feel how it grows stronger with each passing minute.

I'm sitting here again. I quickly ran over there and did what she

wanted, took the cord, made the noose and hung it on the hook. I don't want to look at her anymore. I will just stare at this paper because I know what I will see when I look at her again. Then, at the sixth hour of the last day of the week I will see her and I will have to do what she wants. Then I will have to—

I will not look at her—

There, I just laughed out loud. No, I didn't laugh; it was something inside of me that laughed. I know that I will not laugh over this. I will not and still I know most certainly that I will have to. I will have to look at her, have to, have to do it—

And then the rest—

I'm only waiting to draw this torture out as long as possible. Yes, that's it. This breathless suffering is the highest, most sensuous pleasure imaginable. I write quickly, quickly, just to sit here a little longer, to draw out in these last seconds the ache of my love and desire as it rises to infinity.

Just a little more, a little longer—

Again the fear, again! I know that I will look at her, will stand up, and will hang myself. That's not what I'm afraid of. Oh no! That is beautiful, that is exquisitely delicious.

But there is something, somehow something that is still there—that happens then, something will come, it most certainly will come. The pleasure of my torment is so immense that I feel what happens next, oh, it must be just as unthinkably horrible!

Don't think of it!

Someone is writing something, someone, something, it is all the same to me.

Only quickly, think, remember something—

My name—Richard Bracquemont, Richard Bracquemont, Richard—Oh, I can't go any longer—Richard Bracquemont, Richard Bracquemont- Now, now, I need to look at her—Richard Bracquemont—I need—No—Just a little more—Richard—Richard Bracque—

The commissioner of the 9th precinct tried to repeat his phone call on the telephone but there was only static on the line. He arrived at Hotel Stevens at exactly five minutes after six o'clock. He found the corpse of student Richard Bracquemont in room # 7 hanging on the window crossbar in exactly the same position as his predecessors.

Only his face had a different expression. It was frozen in horrible terror; his eyes were bulging from their sockets. His lips were tightly shut and his strong teeth tightly clenched together. Between them was stuck a large black spider with remarkable violet polka dots. It was squashed and bitten in two.

The journal of the medical student lay on the desk. The commissioner read it and immediately went to the house across the street. He found out that the second floor had been empty and unlived in for over a month.

The Olive Tree

Andrew D. Chumbley

"WHEN I WAS little, God came to play at our house!"

A horse had once died upon the lawn because it had wandered into the garden and had eaten many poisonous flowers and herbs. Where it fell it lay to rot and there it was that the Olive Tree grew. And it was thus, as it is sometimes said:

"God comes upon a dead horse carrying gifts for children."

Beneath the brooding arms of the Olive I met it who was God, by horns and smile I knew it, and O' how we played. We had our fingers in everything and ran about with only the sky to robe us and the earth to dance on.

A shrine of fallen branches and horse's bones we moulded, and when the moon appeared in the day we would lie together. Upon our altar, God showed me all his tricks and sorceries.

He said that the horse must have been a pantomime creature and would not have eaten such deadly leaves if it were a true horse. There were men inside that horse, and only one had died, but he was the survivor.

And then God would become deliriously ravaged by murmurings, much of this I could not hear but I remember many names of people such as Solomon, Nakhthorheb, Apollonius, and others. But one phrase I do recall as it was always preceded by excessive bouts of hysteria:

Get that logical discourse out of my hair!

Besides talking to himself and eating, God would show me one secret. All the birds and animals were sent away that none should know of it. Cracking open the atoms he would lay a cloth of yellow material upon the grass and upon this was placed a stone bowl filled with water. He would stretch his limbs and become a butterfly with eyed wings, then he would float with only one wing showing upon the water.

I ate smoke and air and looked deep into the liquid where God hung suspended.

Visions spun, and voices:

"In England build a church for the adepts, all magick accept and practise to me but in thy name."

•

"Of the Merkabah know this:
The fifth wheel of the Chariot is the orb of Uranus.
This planet hath ten rings and fifteen moons, these are the patterners of the spheres and the Kalas where-of it is written in the Qabalah and the Tantras."

•

A picture of an idiot with many books appeared and fire burnt up all the words and scorched the tongues of all people. Now the idiot is become a wise man, knowing both nothing and nothing. This is the new sword brought against men: it has no point but has sharp edges, it sweeps flesh away.

•

Cimieres, a spirit black and wild and laughing, arises in Africa. The white men are his victims, slain to a Baal.

•

There are eleven knots in the cord of the Brethren.
ALIMAMLAIMA

•

Then God flew away and I shall not see my master again 'til I am a score and one years in age. But do not sleep, a storm is coming up.

Altar! Altar!

Michael Cisco

WHO I AM doesn't matter. This is about an acquaintance of mine. I present it as a tribute to him. Perhaps it's a warning, too. I don't see how this kind of tragedy could be anticipated and avoided, but that's no reason not to try.

I have two items. The first is actually a composite of information taken from various news pieces concerning a fire in a suburb of Los Angeles that I won't name.

The other is a short story by my acquaintance. As far as I know it is unpublished. As far as I can tell, it is also unfinished. Perhaps it was finished in actions rather than words. It was discovered among his papers, and sent to me because it was dedicated to me. This writer had shown me other stories of his in the past and approached me for advice I was happy to give.

I'm not interested in drawing conclusions or making further statements. I'm not sure I can say why I think this is worth publishing, I just have that feeling.

[THE FIRE]

The fire was first reported at about three o'clock in the afternoon of June 21, 2013, on the northern face of the ridge above the 2450 block of _____ _____. The hillsides in the area are covered in dense brush, and dry conditions significantly increase the risk of a serious fire. By 3:30 the canyons on either side of the burning hills were closed, and those persons living in homes closest to the fire were advised to evacuate. Strong winds arose around 4:15, driving the flames in an easterly direction toward more exposed and dry hillsides, but fortunately away from the more heavily occupied part of the neighborhood.

The fire was not fully contained until the next day, destroying much of a small country club in the hills and threatening some historic homes that lay in its path. Several dozen people were treated for smoke inhalation and one victim, a middle aged homeowner, died of a heart attack while trying to evacuate.

Three days after the fire was put out, fire investigators had located the point of origin for the blaze and made a grisly discovery; the charred remains of a man, evidently a victim of the fire he himself set. Dental records positively identified this man as _____ _____, a writer and teacher living in New York City, but born and raised locally; in fact, he set the fire less than a quarter of a mile away from his childhood home, now occupied by an unrelated family, and unharmed by the fire.

Further investigation only deepens arson mystery. A major airline confirms that the dead man flew from JFK to LAX on a red eye flight that landed in the early morning hours of June 21, indicating that he must have gone almost directly from the airport to the scene of the fire. His bank reports that he withdrew three hundred dollars in cash from his account, transacted at an ATM located within the LAX terminal.

Forensics experts release arson details. The theory that the arsonist committed suicide shortly after setting the fire is set aside by the coroner's report, which states that the deceased was burned alive. "The most likely scenario," according to a spokesman for the medical examiner, "is that he set the fire using some kind of fuel, like lighter

fuel, or possibly gasoline, and it got out of hand, he caught on fire, and died like that." The fire is being considered an accident.

When the body was removed from the scene, a small wooden box was found underneath the torso, partially protected from burning by the corpse itself. Charring on the box suggests that the fire was originally lit on or near the box, before spreading to the man and surrounding brush. It appears that the victim fell forward onto the box, smothering the flames. The box was painted and decorated with flowers. "It looks like a little altar," one investigator said. "We are not discounting the possibility at this time that this was a ritual, or some manner of ceremony, that possibly the victim was emotionally disturbed at the time."

[THE UNTITLED MS]

His route home took him past a church, and today workers were disembowelling the place, hauling out the pews, the altar, the pulpit, and depositing them on the pavement to be carted off later. It saddened him to think that some people, the remnants of what likely had once been a sizeable congregation, might come here seeking comfort and find nothing, or converted apartments. He would not have had that problem; while he had no special feeling one way or another about religious people, the ominousness of churches scared him. Here he was, passing this old Catholic church on the opposite side of the street, even going slightly out of his way so as not to have to pass its bland facade too nearly. Now its entrails were spilling out onto the sidewalk, and it was slated to undergo some change. It shocked him a little to see the altar and font among the jumbled pews and the pulpit, which had been set down upright as though a priest were going to sermonize the deserted street. Isn't the altar supposed to be consecrated, he wondered, and the font too? Or do they decommission them first, so that throwing them away is all right? The church, the altar, the font, the mysterious way people had of investing objects with meaning.

He returned thoughtfully to his apartment. He'd been involved

faithfully with the same woman for the last four years, but they could never manage to find work in a single town; so, he lived in New York, she lived three hours away by train, and they saw each other on weekends. They would marry one day, probably, at city hall. When he carried his plate of food to the little kitchen table, it reminded him of the altar. Being alone was not as difficult for him as he suspected it was for other people. He'd always preferred to be alone. It was like living in the rapt attention of an invisible audience.

Unable to keep from nodding, he went to bed early that night, and dreamt himself back to the house in California where he'd been a child. He sees the dim gleam of polished wood, the blonde floorboards in the curtained dimness of the living room. A mourning dove, heard through an open window somewhere. Silence. The upholstered back of a chair looms up before him. Reach up to turn the doorknob. Searching the house. Nobody home. Outside, the sun shines in silence on the hills, light pulled out of the air by thirst, by leaves. Summer. The cool house is a refuge from the blazing glare. There's the bed his parents sleep in, and the huge bureau they both use, looking like a bank of post office boxes, and the top is a collection of jewelry cases with haphazard drawers, glitter, mixed with photographs of himself, his grandmother, English souvenirs.

"You are going to die," the dream says, the silence says, the raging daylight of the tranquil day says. "What you are looking for is..."

The dream is turning into familiar channels now. He's got to stay in the garage, because his parents have some people over and he's naked, so they'll see him, but he can't stay in the garage because there's some problem, something in there with him, maybe it's a snake, or a spider, but he can't go into the house a horrible naked little boy, so he darts out around the garage and clambers up the back wall under the ivy, flies up the street behind the house, up into the hills...

"Death is expecting you, you have a meeting, you are pregnant..."

He got up the next morning feeling out of sorts, and he didn't manage to feel right all day. Everything felt wrong; nothing was wrong. He kept rechecking his work, certain he would find it riddled with errors; everything he did seemed wrong, but he could find nothing wrong. For nearly an hour he dithered, unable to compose an email

to a coworker asking her to look over his report before he submitted it. He ended up submitting the report as it was, resigning himself to whatever trouble that would bring, simply because he couldn't write more than three words without erasing them all and starting over again. When he passed the church on his way home, the pavement before the doors was clear, but he saw the altar again, by itself now and leaning back against the church wall, its whiteness peeping out through the shrubs that grew in a small planter to one side of the meager parking lot, looking as if it had been stashed there furtively for retrieval later.

"The altar!" he dreams. "Where do I find it?"

"You are pregnant," the dream light says. "These words mean something else to themselves. The embryo fruit with seeds waiting to live."

"Where did it go?"

He's beating the bushes in the parking lot of his old grammar school.

"Someone should report this, but I don't want to get anyone in trouble. I'll do it anonymously. Religious objects on a public school campus."

He's trying to find his way out of the bushes.

"The planter wasn't this big!" he thinks. "If I can't find it then I can't tell them where to look for it."

"The city of forests," the dream tells him. "The forest of cities. Do you see it? The sex of unliving buildings. Each lens and outcry will be torn along a seam of longing and recoiling."

Again the dream changes utterly. He sees shining motes adrift above the shade line, so much like light shining through closed eyelids, and as he wakes up to find the sun shining into his face through a gap in the curtains, he still sees the dream sight too, the golden layer of thick sunlight with the nearly motionless particles suspended in it, catching the light, the sun setting, the shadow of a nearly flat ridge line cutting off the light, and somehow he is in a place just high enough so the light hits the top of his head, his forehead, just brushing his eyebrows, but no lower, and below that, the rising, chill murkiness of dark greens, browns, and greys, the brushy wooded hillside, the mo-

tionless trees half-melted into the gloom. His eyes are in the gloom, and he imagines—imagines as he sees this sight and his bedroom and the sun—looking up to see the underside of the sunlight like a layer of honey-colored smoke. The light and dark of the dream seems for a moment to visit the light and dark of his morning bedroom, and there is, plainly, good and evil shining from the face of the sun in the gap in the drapes.

Standing at an intersection on his way to work, he was struck by a note of incongruity in this familiar place that he could not put his finger on until later, when the train was already carrying him away. He was still puzzling over the impression and remembered watching the battered, old-fashioned, taxi-yellow traffic light hanging from a cable—but that signal had been put in only a few months ago, where previously there had been nothing but stop signs. Hadn't they installed a brand new light on a metal post? He reasoned that there might have been something wrong with the light; perhaps it had been temporarily replaced with an old one, but somehow he didn't believe it, and he found himself avoiding the spot superstitiously.

Getting up in the raw morning, the damp, cool, heavy air, the air filling with amber syrup as the sun poured down over the ridge line, the scent of wet grass, the aroma of roses muted by dew jackets, the resinous fragrance of the tough, thorny hillside plants, of mummified leaves and bone dry sticks, then going home in the afternoon when the sun was still high and stroking the landscape, baking the dead pine needles hidden beneath drooping tree canopies so they gave off a dusty perfume when he used to crawl through them. He likes to read about talismans and circles, ghosts. He spends what seems like months ploughing through a thick book of folklore illustrated with antique woodcuts; the flat, heavy images and the strong chemical smell of the glossy pages made him sick, and a feverish, sickish feeling clung about the subject matter too. He reads about the Gabrielenos, the legend of Pauma Wemu, of Wiwot and Chinigchinich. Don't step on any cracks. Watch out for older boys—if you see them up ahead, cross down Edwards and take Hollister home. If they come up behind, don't let them see you run; walk to that alley that opens like an empty spine down the middle of that block before the park,

then duck into it and, when no one can see you, sprint, and with any luck you'll be losing yourself among the shrubs in the park before they know where you've gone. Don't let them catch you.

Going to work in the raw morning, the rumble of cars and trucks and trains, people with pinched faces hurrying anxiously toward the station, blinking in the dazzling sunlight and the wind. The city was tearing up the street again. The sterile city earth was being shown to the sun again, only to be repaved. Don't step on any cracks. He remembered that game. He took the alternate route, avoiding the intersection with the new traffic signal, and climbed the stairs to the elevated train platform. Sitting on the train, he was becoming alarmed at himself. Now that he was sitting still, he couldn't concentrate, and found it difficult to remember what he had to do that day. He was going to work, but he didn't feel like he was going to work. The blue of the sky outside didn't look like blue, although he was sure it was. The sunlight kept jabbing at his eyes. The other passengers were neither familiar nor unfamiliar, but seemed to belong to an entirely new and unfamiliar third category.

He made his transfer as usual, and it didn't feel at all familiar. The effort, however, somehow made it easier for him to take stock of his confusion, and he realized with a baffled relief that he could, at least, describe his problem accurately. It was that part of his mind had not awoken this morning with the rest, but was still dreaming vividly of walking to school in the morning when he was about ten years old. And it wasn't just any day he was remembering—it was a certain, special day. The part of his mind experiencing the dream had separated itself from all the other parts and gone off on its own, so he did not see or otherwise sense anything out of the ordinary, but his physical reactions to the emotions of his dream were not separate, and affected the common body. He felt these displaced emotions one-sidedly, through a deadening numbness that made it difficult to tell what was coming from himself, and what was coming from outside. And why should there be this inner barrier? Thinking that he could fully awaken himself if he could subside through wholly into the dream, he shut his eyes impulsively. What followed instead was a horrific plummeting like a foretaste of a neverending fall in total darkness,

and he threw open his eyelids, panting and clutching with his gaze at the imperfectly familiar objects and people around him, and the whispered words—"I lost...I lost..."—on his lips or in his ears, he couldn't tell which.

After that moment on the train, perhaps by dint of the contrast, the rest of the day was less troubling; but work didn't feel like work. It should have been much more engrossing, much harder, more tiring. It should have appeared to him as a series of discrete tasks, like so many boxes to be packed and sealed; instead, it was all a muddle that barely seemed to require his attention. There was nothing to do, despite constant activity, despite a nervous checking and rechecking of lists.

"I have to see someone," he thought. "I'm having a psychotic episode, or maybe it's a stroke."

He felt fine. A doctor could give his problem a name, and that frightened him. For no reason he could discover, the idea that he might one day calmly tell his supervisor, or a co-worker, maybe even in an offhanded, conversational way, that he had such-and-such, suffered from such-and-such, struck a meaningless dread into him. It was a fear of losing something forever, and there was no hint of a reason for it.

The dream overlaying his life was never inane or bizarre, like many dreams, but always as factual and even in tempo as a relived memory, or an unedited film. Always a return to childhood. Off to school. It was always that particular morning. Here diesel and noise, there suburban morning redolent of sage and wild mint from the damp hillside. Returning home at night from a visit to his grandparents, lying across the back seat of the family car, the highway has no streetlights here, seeing the silhouettes of his parents in the dashboard light, and stars through the windows, the rolling edge of the ridge line showing darker against the luminous blackness of the sky. Sometimes he forgets to take the trash out before sunset, and then he has to run it all the way back to the garage in the dark. From the luminous orange and pale yellow kitchen he steps into blue and black, engulfed in the throbbing night din of the crickets. Holding the bulky sack of trash to his chest, he dashes through the night along an imaginary line plotted to take the quickest possible route from the back door to the light switch

inside the garage. The garage is spectral blue-white in the gloom. If he pulls the sliding door over on the opposite side, he can reach the switch without having to enter the darkened garage first, and snap the light off again from outside as well. He is afraid of being snatched away by Pauma Wemu or bigfoot, even though he never gives the coyotes a second thought, and only eventually learns that the weird yipping chorus he hears every now and then out there in the darkness is the sound they make when they gather together.

No nightmares except his childhood nightmare, the gloating smile, with closed lips, spread wide across a motionless moon-faced thing that watched him from the foot of his bed. Death is coming, relentless death, gazing at him, horrified of him.

It had rained while he was at work, but now the sun was shining, still well above the whitening horizon, whitening the shining water in the street and beaded on the cars and junk heaped along the curb. Someone threw out a cheap particle-board desk and the sight reminded him of the altar; then he was hearing children's voices, as a pair of wide-eyed and emphatic adults guided a troop of young boys and girls past him and into the grounds of the school. The coincidence induced such a wrenching pang of emotion in him that he began breathing through his mouth, and it struck him then, trying to look normal as he threw his gaze far down the street past the column of children, how odd the street looked in the dappled blaze of sun reflecting from puddles and windshields. How was it that so many old cars happened to be parked here just now?

He froze for a moment. Then, trying not to display any sign of distress, he turned for refuge to a drugstore, crossing the street, going inside, and walking all the way to the back as if he were going to fill a prescription at the pharmacy counter, keeping his eyes on the floor because of a vague apprehension that, were he to look up at the shelves, he would see them stocked with the sorts of things that they used to sell in drugstores. Only when he was well at the back did he turn around and look. He stood there for a few minutes in a pure isolation that only deepened, forlornly eyeing rows of packages in a mute appeal to their ordinariness. Pull me out of this, he asked them. Put something boring under my feet, give me back that boredom to stand

on. They did not look familiar or unfamiliar, old or new. This might have been a drugstore in another country.

Another party of children flooded the sidewalk as he came out of the drugstore, and their adult chaperones were calling instructions patiently to them, heading for the crosswalk and the school across the street. Stepping out of the store in a daze, he nearly collided with a boy and was wading in among the children nearly before he realized it, then turned back to get out of the way and saw himself and a ten year old boy simultaneously reflected in the glass door he'd just come through, the two of them brown haired, both wearing glasses, one with an exuberant look on his version of the same face and the other version stricken and monstrously aged. Then one of the chaperones pushed by him with a breathless, distracted apology, and the children swept away in a body to the corner, crossed the street, and tramped into the school. He watched their dim, bleached reflections in the windows of the store, trying to pick out that boy again from the chaos of motion there, but he couldn't be sure the boy was there.

In his dream he is trying to cross a dark room in a dark house without looking in the mirror, because it's dangerous to look at your own reflection in the dark, he doesn't want to see his staring face emerging slowly from the gloom. Inevitably he looks, sees the darting silhouette there in the glass. There is good and evil in the mirror, and now that's looked, good and evil are in the room where he is.

Does he have to go back to work, or does he have to go back to school? Which one is coming? Where do I look?

Walking home from school. Over there on the side street, another boy. He remembers that boy from school; they're in the same grade, but different classes, and sometimes they play together. A sort of dreamy, blonde boy. The boy is there, naked in the sun, on the dirt path that goes up into the hills, framed by the dry brush, waiting for him. He goes to meet the boy, without even noticing they are the same height because the eyes that meet his he's never seen before and the expression of the face is alien.

Good and evil are explaining to him, or rather have explained to him, patiently, that he has to look in the mirror. There is the altar of good and evil. There is the significance and the change, more to-

tal than death, and brighter than life, a chance to step off the map and approach life in its utmost wounding starkness, the sear and chill of life, so that he will know what he is about to lose, the light shut out forever—watch with terror the light's final glimmering, clawing blindly at the emptiness to hold back a moment more—all adult life nothing but a tissue of futilities, empty because unreal, just the vague dream of a boy—then, at the altar, the two halves meet, everything, the cosmos as I live it, suspended, and susceptible to be set again in new terms, different terms—he wakes up groaning "Altar!...Altar!"

His supervisor

they meet in the hall at his workplace.

She was nearly his age, with long dark hair and a dark jacket, golden earrings and bangles.

"I didn't know you had a little boy!" she sang, taking him lightly by the elbow and half-bending oddly to one side, to direct her gaze playfully into his eyes without waiting for him to turn in her direction. She straightened up again right away.

"Why haven't you ever said anything?" she asked, her voice rising and falling in an exaggerated way.

He shook his head.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw you two the other day!" she said, her voice still rather high. "Wasn't that you, at the drugstore on Simons Street? He looked just like you!"

"Oh, no!" he said, becoming exaggerated himself. "No, I have no son. That was—it was a school group, remember?"

"Oh, right!" she said, sensing his embarrassment and trying to set him at his ease again, reaching out to press his forearm lightly with her fingertips. "There was that group there!"

"I just...blundered out into them!"

"Right! Right!" she said, drawing out the sound. "Isn't that funny? Because I saw you and this boy standing right next to each other and I thought, 'Wow! He looks just like you!'"

And when he sat at his desk in his momentarily empty office a few minutes later, he let go all his random thoughts about doctors and

time off. Bleakly he went through the motions of the day, did what was expected of him, and returned home as always, holding his attention gingerly away from the sides and edges of things, almost resigned to be shocked again.

The day of his dream is the innocent morning of a certain day he doesn't think about, when he follows and spies on some of his classmates. A little knot of them gathers in the park, near his house. Five children, boys and girls. A man and a woman come over to them from all the way across the park, smiling. The children follow them up a crumbling fire road and over a slack chain barring the way, into a clearing further up the slope from the park, gradually filling up with broken playground equipment and other trash. The ground here is more and more littered with cigarette butts and flattened beer cans. The little group is still climbing, now pushing their way through the heavier foliage and along the steeper slope above the clearing.

He follows them unnoticed and sees what they all do together, the children weirdly aged and solemn, the man and woman grinning with all their teeth, drunk with good and evil, the wild beautiful wrong that owned them, glassy-eyed and now screwing their eyes shut and then opening them wide to see the sparkling diamond, their pale shapes distorted by inverse flashes. Then something abstract joins them.

He put up his hands to shield his eyes from the glare, his hands warp before his eyes and a shriek bursts out from among them just at that moment, as if his uplifted hands hurt them, as if they are only images and his interfering with their visibility causes an agonizing disruption of their bodies, and that sharp cry shatters his fascination and sends him out of the hillside, the park, onto the bizarrely ordinary street floured grey by an ashen sun that peers and points at him with gestures the trees articulate.

Night falls. He can't sleep. He lies in bed, his vision pulled back to that spot as it must be now in the blue darkness, the yipping of coyotes over something they've killed, and something long and pale half buried in the ground, about the length of a human arm, dead, at rest, and noticing him. Those children finished, so they will forget and go to school tomorrow, but he didn't finish, he saw and ran.

He never sees that man or woman again, and those five show no

sign that anything had happened. School ends, and they all go away; sixth grade is over; he will never see them any more. Now, the little altar they had, what had it looked like? That was not a fragment of concrete, it was stone and wood, decorated. They see the horizon open, they touch the altar and the circle closes. He never touched the altar; his horizon has been hanging open this whole time. He's only just happened to remember. He has to shut the

He just found the box, one day. He brought it home without thinking and now it is sitting before him on the desk as he is writing. The paints and brushes are coming, and when they arrive he will paint the altar correctly, from memory. Find the flowers once you get there

the aim is seize and contract all of life into a point of fierce intensity and act from that point, throw yourself, with all at stake, and without thought of the consequence. To stay in that act forever? Contract life to fit it in a single act?

The walk to school was never this long—the street goes on and on. The canyon telescopes out in front of him and the school doesn't get any closer, no matter how many cracks he avoids stepping on. Not a single car goes by and he sees no one. It's summer. He's going to summer school. All the other children are away somewhere on vacation with their parents, passing through airports, sitting in plane seats, buckled up. The neighborhood is temporarily abandoned to the sharp daylight, the blue jays with their harsh voices, the mourning doves with their soft calls, the sunlight of day, of good and evil.

In the dream, he sees himself decked out in golden banners, dancing in a strong wind, before the altar. a light all over me, a light I can feel

Now it is not light or dark any more. No good or evil any more. At last he sees the little boy he once and always was. The boy approaches, not seeming to know he's there. Now the boy is within arm's length of him. He smiles at the boy. Now the boy sees him. Stares at him. Recognizes him with hatred and begins to scream. Screams.

As Long as the Flesh Remains

Kenneth Grant

A SUMMER EVENING such as this always reminded him of that other evening, long ago, when Snedon had unfolded his incredible speculations. Now, as Marshall surveyed the purple sweep of the hill that rose and fell from shadow into shining light, he recalled that tormented visionary. Snedon had seemed godlike in his madness.

The sky glowed with fire and flung down shafts of flame. Not a leaf stirred in the exhalation of the dying day; Marshall, alone, moved; and enchanted cities seemed to rise up from the earth.

He made a gesture as if to dispel the glamour, and again he thought of Snedon and the deeply buried valley through which they had walked; and he heard again the story of the land behind the veil.

The merest hint of a breeze stirred the leaves; a faint curtain of mist drifted between his eyes, and Snedon's. The remembered form was gone. Yet Marshall was not quite alone, for when the sun set he saw Snedon again, as he had been toward the end, when that other veil had descended between them.

He walked on, immersed in the music of remembered phrases; striving to sound the significance of their whispered ambiguities. When he raised his head again the mist had vanished, and there was movement in the hills. Marshall stopped in his tracks. His attention was indrawn, and its sudden return to externals jolted him. What

he had supposed to be phantoms from another world proved to be a funeral in this.

He watched the slowly receding procession and thoughts of death assailed him. Snedon had assured him, as the veil had parted them, that there was no death, and Marshall had believed him. But he had not glimpsed the terror that twisted Snedon's features, nor had he understood that there is a veil of the spirit, and a veil of the flesh.

Marshall's steps faltered. He was unaware for how long he had walked. The hills had given way to cobbled pathways. A tavern was disgorging a rowdy crowd. Uncouth cries shattered the calm beauty of the evening; they seemed to crystallize a phrase that compelled attention. The words evoked in Marshall a deep response, and their constant repetition resolved itself into an incantation that conveyed to him an indescribable sense of horror.

Continuous walking in the heat had exhausted him. He dragged his feet up a steep slope which led to a malodorous street, and entered the tavern. The chant that had disturbed him, jarred again on his ears. Someone had died, and her name had been Lorelei. Marshall was gripped by a chill that was not of the evening. Together with Lodic, a college friend, he had known a woman of that name. A night of madness.

The following summer, Marshall had met Snedon; Lodic had met Rachel; and Lorelei had vowed revenge. One of the crowd was spelling her name for the benefit of his associates. Odd name it was, foreign. She had been up to no good, of course. They spoke of her with mingled leers and disapproval. The talk then drifted to other topics; someone mentioned a funeral, and then Marshall heard the name 'Rachel'. One of the gossips had seen the procession wind its way to the cemetery over the hills. They gloated over the misery of the man Lodic, who had married the young and beautiful Rachel—after Lorelei had died.

Marshall withdrew as the babel of voices swelled with ribaldry and malice. The fumes of the tavern nauseated him; he was glad when the door swung to behind him. The countryside seemed suddenly to have become a place of pestilence, and the smell of the charnel rose from the cobblestones. He muttered, almost as a curse, the name of the

woman whose last journey he had witnessed. Behind the name lurked its shadow, Lorelei. The 'harlot of the hills', they had called her.

Marshall moved swiftly; but not until he felt the turf again beneath his feet did he moderate his pace. He approached home after nightfall. A faint sound, a pitiable sound, arrested his attention. It came from the house. On the verandah, visible in uncertain starlight, he saw a figure hunched over the table at which he had sat that evening, basking in sunshine. As he moved nearer, the figure stirred and a face hung before him, a pallid mask suspended in a void. Marshall waited in the darkness; the other gazed up at him uncomprehendingly. A wreath of flowers lay between them, the name *Rachel* eerily visible in the starlight. Marshall led Lodic into the house.

Long after dawn, Marshall awoke. The chair beside him was vacant. On the threshold, embalmed in a beam of sunlight, lay the petal of a flower. In the sunshine he sat on, resigned to inaction until the Great Experiment had been accomplished.

The Experiment was the name that Snedon had applied to a process whereby the earth could be changed by influences from another world, the world behind the veil. Marshall had been contemplating this Experiment through the night, as through the years since Snedon's death.

By some subtle alchemy he had gradually assumed the contents of Snedon's mind. When at last he rose and caught a glimpse of his reflection in the bright metal of a hanging lamp, they were surely Snedon's lips that smiled back at him.

Marshall passed from room to room. They were drenched equally in a blazing radiance. He mounted the stairs leading to the study and approached the window that overlooked impenetrable woods, hill upon hill rising beyond. Then he remembered Lodic's words. The man had raved of death and of the dead, of loss, of frustrated desire. But behind the black words, Marshall had sensed light, and in the light a transformation had occurred. He had passed behind the veil and Snedon had returned. It was not at this alone that he marvelled as he

watched the first white wreathes of mist rising from the valley below; it was at the possibilities which the previous day had revealed to him. The world seemed strangely changed. Where another had seen death and longed for the dead, he had seen life and had heard the promise of deathlessness.

He recalled the darkness in the eyes reflected back at him a moment ago; the nose, too, had altered shape and assumed an aquiline cast. This was the outer expression only of an inner transforming influence.

He had instinctively recoiled from the idea of recalling Snedon after the manner of the necromancers; he knew that failure would result. With Rachel, the case might be otherwise, but that did not concern him.

Gathered about him were the ancient books that Snedon had amassed. Marshall had steeped himself in their contents and knew by heart every passage which touched upon the secrets of the Experiment. There were difficulties and great hazards. He had not until now dared the first step toward the realisation of his dream; but tonight, sickened of earth's anguish, he had resolved that the light should manifest; and it had. It was flooding the rooms and illuminating the world outside with a radiance brighter than sunlight. Yet there remained an imperceptible but palpable veil which recalled to him the words of Vaughan, the alchemist:

> *Beneath all degrees of sense there is a certain horrible, inexpressible darkness.*

Snedon had spoken about a Spirit of Attraction which entered into the being of those who attempted the Great Experiment, and who passed beyond. Suppose, Marshall had mused, that Spirit were enticed this side of the veil! Snedon had shaken his head. There had been a glint of anger in his eyes, and Marshall had remained silent. Did he fear the Veil; was relinquishment of the flesh too great a sacrifice? He turned away from the window, a slow fear engulfing him. Lodic had exclaimed: "As long as the flesh remains...". Marshall had not caught Lodic's concluding words. He turned again to the window.

He watched the rising mist float silently over the woods; watched

its thin scarves coil about the sunlit bracken and the waving grasses. He did not know why he hesitated, why the earth today appeared sc enchanting, or why the grass-smothered slopes, the rise and fall of the hills, seemed so charged with beauty. Would it not, perhaps, be wiser to enjoy the Ineffable Mysteries in their outer vestures, than tc penetrate their heart and find...?

Upon his desk lay a heap of papers. The drift of stray sentences made him doubt his sanity. He bit his lips in a torment of indecision. Snedon's meticulous researches were not fancies, and Marshall knew that nothing mattered but the Great Experiment.

Much remained to be done; everything depended upon precision and determination. All the materials were to hand; the house was equipped with the necessities of physical survival, adequate to months of waiting, if need be. A fever of excitement seized him. There was a place long prepared beneath the house. He left the room and descended a spiral staircase. Below ground level, the great light glowed around him more intensely. All things subsisted solely in the vestures of its brilliance. He descended deeper still, and a sudden restless murmur surged within him. He was chanting a distorted name! In precisely what manner the name of a harlot, mispronounced by the *canaille*, had become entwined with his purpose, Marshall was unable to fathom. Now, when he needed all the resolution of which he was capable, it were folly to fear.

Lodic brooded in silence in a room not far removed from the house overlooking the valley of mist. A few hours more and the sun would sink behind the hills and the shadows would descend upon Rachel's tomb.

A tattered volume lay open before him and an otherwise ordinary room was transformed by an array of glittering instruments into the semblance of a surgery, although their shapes, and the phials of coloured fluids, suggested alchemy rather than medicine.

Over a low flame a green liquid seethed in a curiously shaped vessel. Lodic watched the setting sun. A breeze disturbed the curtain

beside him and he transferred his gaze to the book. Slowly he turned its pages, and at the appearance of a certain symbol he laid the book aside. Arched over the fluid he increased the flame's pressure and caused the liquid to erupt. A drop scorched his skin and he suppressed a cry. Then a lassitude resulting from perpetual vigils reasserted itself, and he fell back in his chair, exhausted.

At last the sun's rays vanished. Lodic peered at the liquid, extinguished the flame, and poured the contents of the jar into a narrow-necked phial. Placing it in a bracket, he stoppered the phial securely and selected several instruments which he placed in the bag that he carried on his nocturnal excursions. As the last rays of the hidden sun illumined the room, he left the house.

Lodic found it difficult to check his pace, so great was his excitement. The sky, streaked with the flames of sunset, glowed purple and green above the hills. At the outset of these journeys he invariably encountered a few stray wayfarers. Long after they had become specks in the landscape, he reached the outskirts of wooded land where the silence and solitude were profound. Here, if anywhere, his steps faltered, but a spectral figure seemed to beckon him.

The woods were dark even at noonday, and he well knew that here, after dusk, the darkness was undying. As he penetrated the twisted brakes he sensed the clamour of elemental energies, unleashed in ancient times by savage rites, and now awakened by his obsessive purpose. Gradually, the blackness above and about him lightened. As he emerged from the wood into a pallid landscape the hills loomed large before him, cyclopean shapes lit by the afterglow. He sensed acutely the transition from the hidden life of the forest to the void vastness of the plain, pregnant with silence. Through a break in the hills he glimpsed distant summits rearing their bleached towers beneath the full moon. He swarmed over a low wall and traversed a burial ground where he opened a small gate in an iron-railed enclosure, descended uneven steps choked with weeds, and halted before a half-spent taper held aloft by a stone statue. A thick uneasy flame sputtered into life as Lodic applied a lighted match, and then withdrew from his bag several instruments. The fitful light revealed a necromantic Circle, barely perceptible beneath the débris with which he had covered his tracks

the previous night. Within the Circle stood a tomb of black, glistening marble. He brushed aside the débris and retraced the Circle. Placing the phial of green liquid on the surface of the tomb, he affixed equidistantly about it five talismanic seals, and then stepped within the Circle and extinguished the taper.

The silence grew intolerably oppressive and a sickly odour, redolent of jasmine, pervaded the crypt. Then, as a greenish radiance flowed from the phial, Lodic's breathing became laboured. He dreaded this stage of the 'return'. The light became diffused, and a vague outline, fugitive yet identifiably human, hovered and swayed above the cask. The upraised hand was beckoning him, the face concealed by a scarf of mist. He tried to grasp the form, but it eluded him. The face remained hidden; the arm alone was clearly defined, and the substance composing the rest of the body seemed agitated as by some mechanical agitation. Gradually, it faded away and darkness prevailed. Lodic uttered a moan of frustration as he closed the wicket behind him.

Locked in the solitude of the Great Experiment, Marshall was unaware that summer had fled. The house lay swathed in a grey mist, yet all within was as the brightest day. The rare passer-by perceived a glowing radiance clinging to, yet veiling, the house; but no-one could have gained access to the hidden summerland.

Then there had been a lessening of the glory, a waning of the effulgence. Snedon had withdrawn again, and Marshall lay exhausted by the impact of his experiences. The light glowed no more and veins of darkness laced the mist. And in the night of the spirit that burned blackly at the heart of the house, the outer night brought to its doors the squealing bats, the shrieking whippoorwills.

Marshall vacated the deep place beneath the house and ascended to the study. To the window of the room through which he had gazed upon a world of sunshine, a visitor came frequently to haunt him. It was shrouded in mist, yet its vagueness burned with infernal life, and its lips spouted infamies. Night after night he lay enthralled by the spectre. The profanities, the grotesque convulsions, the lascivious

sighs, melted into a black nightmare. Marshall's mind was anaesthetized; his soul fled; only the flesh remained, engendering phantoms of its self-evoked desires.

Snedon had spoken of a bridge of stars arched over the earth, stooping like a goddess to exalt her chosen to the secret places beyond the veil. Summer skies hinted at this mystery; the silent woods, the gleaming pools, celebrated it. Marshall remembered Snedon's words, but the earth shrank from him in a spasm of denial. For the outer veils of an inner wonder appear false to the flesh that has not yet yielded to the Spirit's flame. He saw again the cobbled streets, the houses of evil; he knew the causes of his failure.

And another spirit haunted the hills. A night had come when the cask had cracked asunder and that which had lain within had risen up and beckoned him...

Lodic watched the swathings fall apart, rotten with damp and dissolution. Something barely tangible emerged. It moved; the face was blurred, the eyes empty of expression. Then the veil slipped, and he saw Rachel as she had been in life.

He sought to remove her from the place of the dead. She lay stretched upon the lid, ghastly in her unnatural revival. In the heat of his morbid ardours, he overturned the phial. Its contents escaped in a hissing green rain. Instantly, the light was extinguished. He clawed the air like a madman, dislodged the lid of the cask and heaved out the corpse beneath. In one of those flashes of inspiration that occur at moments of extremity, he applied the spilt fluid to the body. What he finally dragged away was no less a likeness to the original than the phantom he had ravished.

Lodic concealed the body in the fastness of the hills. At times it lay inert, as if entranced; at other times it became hideously animated and enjoyed him like a wild beast. In the villages, they knew that Lorelei had returned, and confused rumours swelled to a torrent. Then, one day, Lodic was seen huddled in the mist not far from the house that now radiated darkness all about it. A thing of slippery whiteness

was clamped to the window. Through it Marshall's face glared out into the night, and Lodic's glared back, as if Madness beheld itself in the mirror of the mist, in the veil of the flesh.

When Lodic entered the house and ascended the stairs, the thing at the window had pervaded Marshall's study, and Lodic witnessed the loathly marriage. Before disintegrating, the creature burned brightly for an instant, like a flame before extinction; then, where Marshall had lain, Lodic saw only a black, dissolving shadow. For as long as the flesh remains, desire possesses it.

The Other Asterion

Sun Yung Shin

The English word *disaster* is a combination of *dis* (bad) and *astron* (star). *Bad star.* An event caused by an unfavorable alignment of the sky-bodies. A *calamity.*

But of all the games, I prefer the one about the other Asterion. I pretend that he comes to visit me and that I show him my house. With great obeisance I say to him "Now we shall return to the first intersection" or "Now we shall come out into another courtyard" Or "I knew you would like the drain" or "Now you will see a pool that was filled with sand" or "You will soon see how the cellar branches out". Sometimes I make a mistake and the two of us laugh heartily.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "The House of Asterion"

"It's a peculiar apparatus," said the Officer to the Traveler, gazing with a certain admiration at the device, with which he was, of course, thoroughly familiar.

—Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony" (trans. Ian Johnston)

PROLOGUE:
The Cosmos Births the Prisoner

AN EMPTY SYMPHONY of velocity. In the beginning of the world there was nothing. If you listened very closely, with your ear tilted toward the void, you could hear it breathing. Nothing breathed like a great silent bellows and all you could hear was the sound of nothing expanding and nothing contracting. The invisible lungs of the universe. No-color and nothing to see or taste with curious minds. Within the breath coiled something like a tensed muscle, something readying itself to spring. Patient as a trophied hunter or a benevolent mother.

After a near-infinity of years of this unhurried inhalation and exhalation, a scintilla of dust entered nothing.

Nothing swallowed this particle and a mote-sized convulsion, a miniscule choking, an imperceptible gagging on this speck, this impurity, this idea. Like a proto-Jonah it was engulfed but not digested, it swam inside the vast nil, blinded by its no-color darkness. Its inner absence. It became an untouchable inner navel within the black hole. That pinprick of mental noise deep within a quiet mind. A bit of grit inside the oyster of the proto-cosmos. The first queen of the first beehive, her perfect hormone-weather waking the drones and workers into sensibility.

Some might say that this was the origin of our conscience. What might grow into a moral reckoning. The itch of guilt or the deeper burn of shame. A pebble dropped into the deep end of the pool.

And a tremendous force began bending the nothing within itself, a spring or a bow being drawn inward further and further, tighter and tighter to the point of breaking. And then when the bow was as thin as nothing itself, when the strap was as thin as sound, a great release. And from this violent freeing of energy hurtled a billion pieces of light with a thick protective halo of space around each of them.

Each dense portion of space unfurled and expanded like a lustrous flower opening toward the sun. Something opaque and endless somewhere far away thinned an imperceptible amount. Somewhere else, a

sheet of darkness began cracking invisibly, moving inward from the unseeable outside edges.

Eventually, achieved through a series of violent clashes, Earth was born and glistened blue and green and its life forms began their cycles of formation, competition, adaptation, evolution, and extinction. There was and there shall be no escape from this great wheel, this inescapable machine. The land choked with lava, hot then hard. The evolution of the eye. Fearsome creatures from nightmares and dreams.

Unfathomable oceans of ice scraping their way across the surface of the planet, trapping and grinding everything to frozen dust and carving out vast scars and bowls.

Handprints on the walls of caves and spears sharpened. Primates walking upright. What we call hominids. *Afarensis, africanus, habilis, erectus*, and others. Hand axes. Necklaces and earrings.

Theft. Abandonment. The first murder.

Gods invented, feared, and prayed to. Sacrifices of all kinds. Animals roped and yoked. Virginity named and fetishized. Priestesses. The first kings and queens. Altars and the first permanent structures built. Architects and slaves. Grave goods buried with their illustrious owners for their use in the unending afterworld. Copper, bronze, iron, silver, gold. Sword and shield. Horses and soldiers. Money and its malcontents. Seductions and infidelities.

The idea of crime. The invention of the criminal. Banishment and exiles. Other punishments to the mind and body.

Architects and inventors.

Churches and temples and altars.

Mazes and labyrinths.

The first prison.

Prisoners.

PART ONE:
Asterion and a Peculiar Apparatus

I am a guard at an unusual prison. In fact, it is the only prison in the world, or the universe for the matter. Actually, I will admit to you, reader, that this prison is indeed the universe itself. But it has many tricks and uncanny ways, and one of them is that it is a real prison on the real planet and houses real people, who the moment they enter the prison under guard and their cells under lock and key, become something other than people. They become prisoners, they are defined by the structure that keeps them within it. Many metaphors may come to mind: a baby within its mother, a snail within its shell, a hand within its glove, a corpse within its coffin.

Like music captured and trapped in a parallel, one-dimensional world of black lateral ovals (some empty, some filled in) and vertical lines on lined paper, the prison comes alive when it is expressed through the actions of its prisoners. The prisoners, in this way, are like musicians in an orchestra. There are an infinite number of them and there is an infinite combination of notes, or sounds, that can be played. Yes, these sounds are purely imaginary, but it is nevertheless an endless game of high elegance. It is played in space if not necessarily in all dimensions of time.

Our time is recursive and forking. Our time is a garden in which all realities are simultaneously possible. All paths are truly one path. From the time of birth to the time of death, every word you utter is part of one long sentence. This sentence is utterly, heartbreakingly unique. Never before and never again. Yet they, in ensemble, create One Sentence. It holds and houses us. Announces and defends us. Blesses and confesses us. Curses and condemns.

As I tend to them, the prisoners, I must pay attention to and interact with the physical structure; I don't know if I am more like an instrument tuner or a minor conductor. An orchestra may not be the most fitting analogy but it allows me to think of my vocation as somewhat elegant, rarefied, with the potential for beauty, if even the beauty has a hint of violence, like a piece from the Romantic period

that takes advantage of all the octaves and evokes emotions from the sublime to the savage.

At the orphanage where I spent my formative years, nearly everything a child might need was scarce, except for music. Of this there was no shortage. One of the nurses loved music and had a phonograph that was kept in the atrium. The music—all kinds—filled the dark rooms and hallways and even the attics and porches like water. The long dormitory in which I slept and kept my few possessions was, while a long way off from the atrium, able to receive the sound as if it was flowing right to me, enveloping me, entering me. After coming of age and leaving the orphanage, I continued to seek that same auditory experience, hearing as if underwater, or hearing as if music was life itself, but have yet to find it.

Now, in the prison, I have to do without real music. I am more like an ear, or a machine that records live music, as I am always present to listen to the prisoners and also the sounds of the prison building as it interacts with the prisoners. If only I could play every moment back infinitely and relive every time, broken into segments of my own or the prisoners' choosing. But it doesn't work like that.

I tend to the prisoners. I say "*I* tend to them" because, it may surprise you to know, I am the prison's only guard. In fact I am currently the only person at the prison aside from the prisoners. That is correct: there is no warden, no physician, no librarian, no cook, no janitor, no shop teacher, no psychiatrist, no chaplain, no teachers, no lawyers, and no visitors—so far.

I confess that I harbor a longing for music and part of me keeps a small portion of hope alive, like a tiny flame in a glass jar, that someone or something will arrive with music. No one here can sing and no instruments are allowed. So I go on, waiting. If there is an end to my obligation here, my first step will be to find a record shop and I will search for the music through which I floated every night as a child.

Sometimes I dream that I almost hear it, that it is hovering somewhere nearby, but morning breaks the spell and my day begins, like in the vacuum of space, without sound. Sound cannot exist without something through which to move and perhaps the air here is too

thin, too evasive. If I close my eyes and put my hands out in front of me, I can feel the air eddy around me, swirling and silent.

Every nine years I have a special duty. It involves the receipt of a gift. Some call it a sacrifice. *Surrender, give up, suffer to be lost.* We can choose to look at this transaction in a variety of ways. Some say that these nine people, these nine young men, are guilty. They must be cleansed.

This duty is directly related to my favorite prisoner, or, my only prisoner. He is multiple prisoners, he is one prisoner. He has the ability of bilocation. He can be in two places at once. He can be in several places at once. He wears time like others wear clothing. Space folds and unfolds like a child's origami bird.

This year, the youths arrive, as usual, on time. They appear in the space outside of the prison, as if dropped there by the hand of a god.

I would say *they arrived on the doorstep*, but there are no doors. There are no windows. There are no bars, no locks, no keys. No stairs, no ceilings.

Asterion, on these occasions, waits in the center of the prison. His house. He is sometimes eager to show the youths around this impossible compound. He sits reading books on philosophy, books on various types of propositions, possible and impossible. Books of logic and the real and the unreal. The actual and the fictional.

Though he has the head of a bull, no flies worry Asterion about the face and ears. This is fortunate because unlike whole bulls, he has no long tail with which to swish away irritations. He has hands, beautifully formed, and a thickly muscled neck holding up his strong, velvet-furred head. The rest of his body is also nobly made, and white as marble or mother's milk. He has no need of clothes. Or weapons.

I greet the guests, the youths, at the entrance at which they wait. One is crying silently, tears trickling down his smooth cheek. Others show fear on their faces. Still others have a distant look on their beautiful faces and appear to be looking at nothing in the distance. One begins singing a folk song as I lead them through one of the many passages. Once a person reaches the inner section of the labyrinth, there is no return. The way back is impossible without guidance. None have escaped. Asterion has long ceased looking for an exit. Oh, the first

many months there was so much anguish, always walking the halls and paths, keeping the flame of hope kindled. Each week he spent fewer hours wandering the identical passages. Rubbing his beautifully colored horns against the hard walls, even to the point of breaking them. At last he accepted his fate. The master of his house.

The nine youths are drawn inexorably toward the center. Though the labyrinth is flat, we are like water running downstream and there is no possible reversal. Gravity itself is drawing the nine to their shared destiny. In this, together, they have a fortune denied Asterion. Asterion, the only creature of his kind. His mother's love could not save him, just as the youths' mothers' love cannot rescue them.

I have led this activity, ceremony, so many times I have lost count. The youths, though surely individuals, have come to take on a cast of sameness for me. Straight hair, curly hair. Tall, short, wild-eyed, dull-eyed. They may be individuals when they enter, but like separate rain drops pitching into the wide, iron-colored sea, they merge as they fall.

Eventually, after what sometimes seems like an infinity, we arrive into the central area of this special structure. Here I leave them, not needing to bear witness to what is shortly to follow. The nine huddle together, backs touching backs, all limbs and shudder, waiting. As I walk away, I hear Asterion's steady, light footsteps coming closer.

PART TWO:
The Favorite Games of Asterion

After, there is never a trace of them. The youths have, for my purposes, disappeared. There are no mass graves, no burial mounds, no mausoleums, no tombstones, no grave markers. No bodies. No bones. No clothing. No sandals. No dirges.

What remains is a slight iron scent in the air and a very sluggish prisoner. His eyes unfocused, his gait uneven, and his speech slurred, he must be helped to bed. This I do gladly. His body is almost unbearably hot to the touch, as though an inner furnace is operating at full capacity, but he himself always begins to shiver. It's as if he feels all

the cold in the world. As if he is not surrounded by air but by great banks of snow and ice in all directions.

He allows me to lay him upon his bed. With his great and fierce head resting on his pillow, a thick blanket pulled up to his chin, he always sleeps for some time after the disappearance of the youths. Sometimes it's hours, other times it's days. Sometimes, after I leave him, I turn back before reaching a bend, and regard him. With all but his face under the bedding, he could almost be a real bull, whole and complete. *If only his true father, the snow-white bull, could see him now*, I think to myself.

It is during these times that I find him most often in other rooms of the labyrinth. Though I am but one, he is many. In one chamber he is arranging flowers in a white vase. In another he is swimming, attempting with great effort to keep his heavy head above water, resting frequently at the side of the pool, his great round eyes looking upward toward the sky. In yet another he is pretending to walk up the non-existent stairs and admonishes me to *hurry, hurry or you'll miss the marvelous concert on the second floor.*

As I see it as my duty to provide comfort to the prisoner, I play along. I say, "Will the famous so-and-so be playing first chair?" or "Shall we pick more flowers tomorrow out in the fields beyond the palace?" or "Your father's servant says that dinner is almost ready and he is most eager to have you join him in his private dining hall."

This last one is a variation on one of his favorite games, or little plays. For like a play, it is something real and something unreal, all at the same time.

Sometimes I play his father, the king, and at other times he wants to play his father. Sometimes I play his mother and other times he plays his mother. One time, during an especially long period of sleep, the chamber bloomed with Asterions, each making its own courtly gestures, pantomiming conversations with imaginary guests. Even dancing, bowing, pretending to eat on plates with fork and knife as humans do.

In my off-hours, when I am sleeping, not nearly so deeply or as long as my prisoner, but deeply enough to dream, I see a parade of youths passing by me. Each looks into my eyes with the saddest expression

you could imagine. Each says, "I want to live. I have just begun. I want to walk through to my future. I want to master a trade, marry, have children of my own. I want to grow old and feel the sun on my face in my own courtyard. Help me." And to each one I must turn away. Sometimes I wake, my pillow wet with tears. Whether tears of the youths or my own, it is impossible to tell.

After a period of Asterion's high spirits and theatrics, he often falls into a deep depression. It is indeed like he is in a deep hole, so deep he does not even think to call out. During these times, I cannot rouse him from the floor of his bed chamber. He does not groom his hair, his room gathers dust because he will not allow me in it with a broom and mop, he seems to age years in a few weeks. The skin around his eyes turns a deep color and his eyes lose their lustre. His pearly horns fall off of their own accord.

Nothing cheers him up except, occasionally, stories about his beloved sister Ariadne. Before he came to his house, he and Ariadne played throughout the palace. She did not fear him or scorn him, as others did.

She tied ribbons around his horns and played hide-and-seek. Her laughter was like flowers. She told him the stories of their family, how their oldest brother Androgeus traveled to Athens to take part in their games. He won several of them and, out of jealousy, was murdered. Ariadne told Asterion that their mother had said that Minos was never the same after the death of Androgeus. Ariadne declared to Asterion that he, Asterion her baby brother, was her favorite. She would say with the seriousness of a child, "Asterion, I could never love anyone as well as you!" Though their other siblings cursed him and insulted him, calling him, "Monster!" "Bastard!" "Abomination!" they didn't dare when Ariadne was near.

Asterion mostly ignored the insults of others, secure in Ariadne's affection and protection. Because no tutor would go near him for fear of his accursed condition infecting them with misfortune, Ariadne took it upon herself to teach him his letters, sums, the laws of the natural world, the names of the star formations in the sky, poetry, song, and dance. Rules of the court. Military history. Everything a prince would need to know.

Though she was but a child, Ariadne was skilled at many crafts, especially weaving. When Asterion was born, she began a tapestry containing the story of his life. As he became older, and wilder, the tapestry became more graphic, disturbing. After his birth, mirrors were outlawed in the palace, and Asterion looked to the tapestry to see how he appeared as he grew.

I wonder if Ariadne has kept up my tapestry, Asterion says wistfully. *I'm sure she has, and I'm sure it is a thing of unrivaled wonder*, I would say to him then. He would, at those times, drift into unspoken reveries. Sometimes I would then hum, tunelessly, until he fell into a light, peaceful sleep.

PART THREE:
Like a Band of Iron

Nearly nine years passed in relative tranquility in the house of Asterion. I went about my business as usual. There were always a thousand things to do around the place. Adjustments, repairs, improvements, maintenance. Busy as the town's carpenter, or a housewife with her many children.

Time wheeled forward and it could be felt as a kind of vibration throughout the prison. An almost tangible force. Sometimes thick and other times paper-thin.

As usual, though the world turned, neither Asterion nor I felt the ravages of time. Had there been mirrors, their serene surfaces would have shown no advancement of age, or only momentarily, and then erased, reverted. And though I did all the work and Asterion lounged like a nobleman, fatigue never visited my limbs and weariness remained a stranger.

And before I knew it, the week of the nine was almost upon us.

Always before, I was my own person. I had my role to fulfill, yes, but I chose the order and manner of my duties. I had a great deal of latitude in running the prison and caring for my ward. I was comfortable with my routines, though I felt the edges of a craving, a craving

for music from elsewhere, begin to stir within me, somewhat stronger than usual. I didn't dare to hope that it meant that my time here was almost at an end. I was not prepared for what was to come.

Mysterious changes arrived—starting with me.

Seven days before the expected arrival of the nine, I began to feel a slight headache, from which I had never suffered before. *Healthy as a horse*, Asterion always used to say brightly. *Knock on wood*, I would respond with equal cheer. I drank more water and tried to close my eyes when the sun seemed too intense. I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore the incessant pounding, a throbbing so regular it seemed to overshadow and mock the very beating of my heart, the pulsing of my blood.

Six days before their arrival, my fingers and feet went numb as blocks of stone. They even looked pale, as though the blood were retreating from them, slowly, like a tide receding with the moon. It was difficult to carry out my tasks as I tried to compensate for the lack of sensory perception. And the headache did not subside, but grew solid and rigid, like a band of iron around my skull.

Five days before the ceremony, I felt a tightness in my chest and my left arm grew rigid and pained, as if a line of needles were marching up it and closer to my heart with every hour. The numbness grew and the headache settled behind my eyes like iron weights. Deep in the recesses of my mind, I could hear something inchoate, perhaps attempting to take form, but whether it was the coming of music or not, I could not say.

I tried to continue my duties as usual and Asterion was so distracted that he didn't notice. I kept a smile on my face.

Four days before the youths would meet Asterion, the pain slipped from my body like water from a tipped pitcher. But there was something new, something of which I could make no sense. I began, involuntarily, to mimic Asterion. First, just in small movements, a twitch of the lip, a shuffle of the foot, a sigh or cough. Asterion still did not notice anything awry. At first I could distract him after copying some inconsequential motion by doing something immediately after, such as moving a piece of furniture or asking him about the weather.

Whatever had been in my mind had disappeared, leaving no trace.

Three days before the sacrifice, I began shadowing him completely. This he could not help but notice and I had no control over my body whatsoever. I lost the power of speech and could not explain to him that I was possessed by some inexplicable and unseen force. I could not even express with my face my consternation and confusion. Whatever Asterion's face did, mine did. Identical clouds of astonishment, irritation, and then vexation crossed our visages. I could not fight it physically and my spirit shortly thereafter followed. Though I was relieved to be rid of the torment of the previous days, this joining with Asterion was uncanny, disquieting beyond compare.

Then two days before the cleansing, my body no longer shadowed Asterion, but, how can I say it, *foreshadowed* him. Whatever he was *about* to do, I did first. If he was going to lie down on the cool floor, I did it first. If he was going to stretch and yawn, I stretched and yawned first. Though our house, it is true, did not follow all the laws of logic one might expect, this was of a completely different flavor than Asterion appearing in different rooms of the labyrinth. All those Asterions were also the real, one Asterion. Yet each moved and thought with an individual will, as if the one Asterion was as dense as a hundred people, but without being heavier, without being burdened. They all fit somehow, simultaneously, in Asterion.

Yes, Asterion had always referred to me affectionately as *the other Asterion*, but this was taking it too far.

One day passed with me performing every action of Asterion's in advance. What could I do but surrender? Inside, I began to weep for the loss of my freedom, however limited it might have seemed. What began to take the place of my will was a seed of an unexpected feeling. While I had always had affection and regard for my ward Asterion, I would not have said what I felt toward him was what was growing within me. Surely, I thought, this was love. His whole being became something like music to me. Never farther from him than an arm's length, but never closer, I began to sense that I was fulfilling some new purpose. Once he accepted the new reality, Asterion himself seemed happier than ever. He seemed light, and once, when he turned in the late afternoon light, I thought that I could even see through him to the space beyond him, for just a moment.

A space that seemed to lose all its edges. Perhaps I was becoming Asterion's soul.

A faint suggestion of the music of my childhood return to me, at the periphery of my consciousness and memory.

On the morning of the day, I/he walked to the edge of the prison and as I/he put my/his face in the air, I/he sensed a shift in the wind. There was a new odor, faint but distinct, of salt on the wind. And something else very subtle, complex, something that I/he could not identify. An animal? Some kind of rare flower? I/he experienced a strange charge throughout my/his body, as if the air around the labyrinth became ever so slightly heavier. As if the earth below us became denser, tugging, holding us tight.

Never let me go, I said to myself.

Never let me go, Asterion said to himself.

PART FOUR:
Unfurl Before Us

And the morning came, as did the nine youths.

The music, or truly the desire for music, grew stronger within me, like a kind of pressure, pushing outwards. My skin felt tight.

For the first time, I did not greet the youths and guide them to the center, because it was not something Asterion would have done. I could not act on my own accord. We were waiting in the middle of the labyrinth. Our breathing was steady. Our bodies felt light as air. We had thoughts of Ariadne and our childhood, hiding in the servants' rooms and running through the long halls, up and down the stairs. In our mind's eye, we saw rich fields of golden wheat and seas of green grass. It seemed to be the height of summer, when you could almost hear all the living things growing and ripening in the good warmth of the sun. In the azure sea, each wavelet rose like the back of a horse at an easy gallop and subsided in perfect sympathy with its brothers.

After a time, footsteps approached.

I heard the whistling of a tune that become bolder as it came clos-

er—it was music, it echoed and came closer.

The boys entered the chamber. The passageway behind them remained in shadow. Our eyes took them in and Asterion was the first to notice something queer.

One youth, who was whistling the song, taller and more heavily built than the others, strode forward. We saw his handsome, human face. His dark eyes steady.

How unusual, thought I, wrinkling my brow. *How unusual*, thought Asterion, wrinkling his brow.

Ariadne would laugh, we thought, *because she loves surprises.*

We've dreamt of that tune, we thought, *feeling something inside us catch ablaze.*

The beautiful youth advanced. A roaring white noise entered our bull-ears.

The thought, *my name means* star, came to us.

Time rippled toward us, bearing down.

We saw our old tapestry unfurl before us.

The whistling stopped, and there was a brief aftersound.

The last thing we saw before the world disappeared was the blinding dazzle of a blade and small ball of fine thread, its delicate tail leading away from us.

The Divine Wrath Syndrome

Dale Pendell

WHEN, ON THE morning of March 28, the richest man in the world was found dead in his bed, having expired peacefully in his sleep from what, for lack of other explanations, was termed "natural causes," there were few mourners. A head-lining obituary appeared in the *New York Times*—as much by a fortuitous lack of competition rather than the intrinsic merits or interest in the life and accomplishments of the multi-multi-hundred billionaire. While Wan Lin Wu was not a household name, his current position on the top of the heap of the richest of the rich earned him a heading in bold type.

Another billionaire died the next night, also in his sleep, and also, to all outward appearances, from natural causes. His name, Francis Intelli, was much more popularly known in the United States, and the stories of his rise in the computer marketplace and his philanthropy filled the obituaries. Only a few of the papers happened to mention that Mr. Intelli, at the time of his death, yes, had been the world's richest man. For one, tycoon watchers had become accustomed to thinking of Francis Intelli as "the world's third richest person," and had not adjusted to the death of Mr. Wu the night before, nor to the fact, probably unknown to Mr. Intelli, that due to some recent reverses in his global conglomerates, Sheik Abdul Shamil and Francis Intelli had, in fact, exchanged places as the number two and number three of the world's richest.

When Abdul Shamil died the following night, more than a few reporters privately noted the coincidence of the demise, on three successive nights, of the world's three richest people, but this fact was deemed unworthy of a place in the faintly sanctified and reserved spaces of the obituary page.

With the fourth death the following night the tabloids put it all together and ran headlines such as "Who's Next?" or "Four Richest Men in the World Dead in Four Nights."

Perhaps because it was April 1, many ignored the headlines, but with the death of Oscar Pellipad the following night, according to *Forbes* magazine the "world's richest man" at the time of his death, superstition triumphed widely over the obdurate defenders of coincidence. News shows featured debates between scientific defenders of skepticism and the unlikely mix of clerics and new age mystics invoking Divine intervention.

As to "who's next?", Joshua Carrigan, the man who just five days before had been the world's fifth richest man, was located by reporters and agreed to be interviewed. Joshua Carrigan simply stated that he was indeed sorry for the tragic string of coincidental deaths, and that, no (laughter), he was in excellent health himself, and not at all worried.

For two days there were no more deaths of the world's richest billionaires, and if, on the third night, three billionaires had not died within hours of each other, the story would have disappeared. The story that did come out revealed that the world's two richest billionaires had skipped two and one nights of sleep, respectively. Thus reassured by headlines reading "World's Richest Still Alive" that the universe was proceeding with pachinko-like integrity, free of moral or superstitious spells or hexes, each had enjoyed, respectively, a snifter of fine cognac and a tumbler of single malt scotch and retired for some much-needed sleep.

The following day *Forbes* magazine received a half dozen worried calls from elite members of their most elite list, checking the figures used in the rankings. Several were upset when the *Forbes* staff would not reveal more details about their competitors, and if, perhaps, they just might be richer than they appeared.

Alphonso DiCometti, assured by *Forbes* that he was now, without doubt, at the top of the list, did three things. First, on the premise, certainly the most sensible, that the previous deaths had been assassinations perpetrated by unknown but highly skilled terrorists, he hired a blue-ribbon security team from Black Hand, Inc., to secure his mansion and its extended premises. Second, and third, on less reliable grounds (but why not cover all the bases?) he got a prescription for amphetamine from his personal physician, and then gave away half his fortune.

The next death missed the morning papers, because Michael Berthold III, unaware that Alphonso DiCometti had disposed of half of his wealth, and thus falsely believing himself to be in the safe number two spot of the wealthiest tycoons, had relied on amphetamines alone, not falling asleep until after lunch, and even then by accident, having merely reclined to close his eyes for a moment. The evening press got the scoop.

In the following two weeks the world's charities, museums, and universities received the most astonishing endowments in their histories. Gifts to political organizations also hit new records, and there were even a number to direct gifts to the United States Treasury, "to help pay off the national debt," which indeed occurred. Nonetheless, after two weeks, there had been another twelve deaths announced.

Autopsies were unable to find any trace of poison or trauma in the bodies of the deceased. "Heart failure" was the official cause of death in every case, even those with pace-makers or with EMT squads standing by with electro-cardiac stimulators. *Forbes* began charging high fees for their latest rankings, and hired on a substantial new crew of financial sleuths.

Religious leaders around the world revived medieval notions based on the godliness of poverty, and there was serious talk of once again declaring that the charging of compound interest was a sin. Bills to such effect were introduced into Congress, some naming the authority of Aristotle. Detractors claimed that outlawing compound interest would bring all human progress to a standstill, that it would be like stopping the Great World Clock that drove society to ever greater and greater efforts. An economic philosopher said that the exponential

curve was actually the signature of the full beauty of growth, and that to deny compound interest was to deny life itself. Congressional votes were postponed awaiting the recommendations of a special committee. Temples, churches, and mosques flourished. Certain clergymen stated that, as the world's poorest were already dying in their sleep every night, the new syndrome represented a Divine, or perhaps merely cosmic, attempt at balance.

By the beginning of summer, when the death toll of the world's very richest had reached one hundred, the rush to give away money had so overwhelmed the experts on such matters that no one could be sure who was among the world's richest top ten, or even in the top fifty. A theologian coined the term "divine wrath syndrome" and the news media picked it up. Obscure names began to appear on the list of the victims, and papers were published in economic journals attempting to correlate the changing values on the world currency exchanges with the order of the continuing deaths.

By the end of summer there were no more billionaires—they had all disposed of their fortunes to such an extent that estimations of the world's richest were merely in hundreds of millions. A few observers noted wryly that this diminution of fortune caused not the least alteration of life style.

A few of the Very Rich said "to hell with it" and retired, maintaining only enough wealth for an annuity, choosing to pursue more youthful dreams in the arts: painting, theater, and music. One ex-tycoon became a full-time entomologist, living on his salary, and fired his psychiatrist.

On All Fools Day of the next year the "Divine Wrath Syndrome" had migrated to a small box in the financial section of the *New York Times*, and short researched obituaries were necessary to place the deceased among the world's richest. With millions of millionaires in the world, a certain fatalistic attitude emerged among financial elites, comparing the chances of being the world's richest person on any given night with being struck by lightning, or dying in an airplane crash. A more sporting élan became fashionable. Governments tabled their reform bills and banks and traders and businesses were left free to run to the ticks of the Great World Clock.

Not every victim of the "Divine Wrath Syndrome" made the papers, and sometimes deaths of less substantial individuals were mistaken for their betters, initiating, when the *Forbes* research team came up with an estimate of the net worth of the deceased, huge and unnecessary sell-offs and distributions among the ranks of even the moderately rich. Such activity, in a way not fully understood but nonetheless commented upon by countless financial analysts, spurred the stock market to new highs, and a feeling of general prosperity pervaded the world's financial capitals.

After three years had passed, a statistician proved that the death rate among the very rich was no higher, and, in fact, far lower, than among the lower classes. After that, the passing away of the very rich was treated much as it had always been treated, sometimes receiving national notice, and sometimes not. In January of the next year the Journal of the International Psychological Association devoted an entire issue to the analysis of the "divine wrath syndrome" as a case of 21st century mass hysteria.

Any Corpse

Brian Evenson

I

WHEN SHE AWOKE, a shower of raw flesh had fallen in the field. She watched the furnishers sweep their way slowly towards her, moving awkwardly in their armatures, prodding the rent bits where they lay. What seemed fresh and unmaggoted and was large enough to grasp they gathered. They would smoke and preserve it, and then try to sell it as provision. What was rotten they kicked dirt over, lifting their faces to the sky as they scraped the dirt along with their feet.

There was nothing for her here. No, nothing. The furnishers could not understand this. They could in fact understand very little, she had come to realize, and were it not for their armatures they would not be able to make pretense of being human, the air pressing too heavily upon them. One of them, indistinguishable to her from the others, approached, bowing and scraping and said in its gargly voice, "Query: Shall person be furnished?"

"No," she said. "What do you have, meat?" It gave the flinching gesture that she had come to understand as assent. "I don't need meat," she said. "I need a body."

"Body made of meat," the furnisher said. "So too meat made of body. Let it be written and beads exchanged."

"No," she told him, "I need a whole body."

"Whole," it said. Unless it was "hole".

"Complete. Someone recently slaughtered, one of the newly de-

ceased," she continued, trying now to ape the spirit of their own locutions, to make them understand. "One whose flexible organs would yet be capable of speech, not with lineaments already hardened in the sun."

"Organs," he said. "Yes. Lineaments, yes." He barked something and the furnishers behind him began rooting through their bags.

"A complete body," she insisted. "Who are you?" she asked. "Which one? Are you the one I spoke to last time? Do you have a name?"

"These are many queries," he said, and hastily retreated.

The rest came at her bowing and presenting their bags to her, but she waved them away. Confused they turned in circles a moment and then bowed and presented again, but she had already turned and walked back into her cave, where she knew they would not follow her.

There were other fields, other caves. Everything told her there must be. Her templature could be moved—she could probably hire the furnishers to do so. Or the slaughter would change and bodies would again present whole or nearly so if she were to wait a little. A few days, maybe, or a few weeks. Was she willing to wait? Soon her provisions would dwindle and then she would be forced to go hungry or buy from the furnishers. Or leave.

She watched the furnishers from the darkness of her cave, crouched and aimless near the mouth. Why did they not enter? What were they afraid of?

Soon, she strode out to the mouth, standing still in shadow of the mouth where they would not approach. This time she had her stick with her and as she spoke struck it against the rock of the mouth. They gave little shivers with each blow, but whether they were of pleasure or pain, she did not know. Once she had a corpse, she would ask it. Perhaps it would tell her.

"A corpse," she said. "Bring me a corpse."

They mumbled to one another and then one approached. Whether the same as before or different, she couldn't tell.

"Person, excuse," the envoy said. "Person will be furnished in meat."

"Not meat," she said. "I shall not buy meat from you. Never. But I shall buy a corpse."

There was much confusion at this. "Person pay well?" the envoy asked.

"Yes," she claimed. "Very well."

"Person will have corpse," it said, and gave the flinch of assent.

She had just begun to turn away when the envoy continued. "Query," it said. "What corpse?"

"What corpse?" she said. "It doesn't matter what corpse. Any corpse. As long as it's freshly dead."

"Query. Any corpse?"

"Yes," she said.

"Freshly dead," it said.

"Yes," she said.

"Queries. Person pay well?" it said. "Any corpse?"

"Correct," she said.

For several hours, they conversed, using that strange gargled speech so distant from her own language that she couldn't even make out the parts of it, couldn't really decide if they were speaking in discrete words or in something else entirely, a kind of flow of sound that couldn't be parsed. She observed them from the shadow of the cave. Then again they fell silent, and one made its way to the cave's mouth.

"Query," it said. "Any corpse?"

"Are you the same one?" she asked. "I already answered that," she said. "Any corpse, as long as it's freshly dead."

It turned and mumbled something at the others. When they responded, it turned back to her.

"Person, please to proceed out of cave," it said.

"Why?" she said. "Do you know where to find a corpse?"

"Yes," it said. "Any corpse."

She wondered at the locution, then shook her head and slung her grapple over her shoulder. She stepped out and into the sun. "Well," she said. "Where is it?"

They crowded around her, jostling her, pressing her tightly. They were awkward, ungainly in their armatures, but by the time she realized what they were doing, it was too late, there were too many of them. She struck a few away with her stick and managed a few steps, but several had already taken their place and there was nowhere to go. They kept clawing at her, dragging at her, trying to pull her down. She fell quickly to her knees. She tried to turn back to the mouth of the cave. She got her hand on her grapple but her arms were pressed down now and she couldn't raise it to strike. She opened her mouth and screamed and something filled her mouth. A few minutes later she was dead.

Soon, everything was as it had been, the furnishers standing at a distance with their cloth bags, bowing. One of them, a representative or envoy, approached and spoke to the woman's body.

"Any corpse," it said, and extended what in the armature passed for a hand. "Person pay well."

It stayed there, false hand extended, patiently awaiting its reward, its fellows attentive and eager behind it.

II

When he awoke, a shower of raw flesh had fallen upon the field. It lay there, glistening in the sun. Where were the furnishers today? he wondered. Usually they were here and eager, scavenging the fields and then trying to sell to him. Sometimes, he had to admit, he bought, but only after the flesh was smoked. One smoked meat was like another, he had come to feel, and if you were to eat any flesh, what did

it matter what flesh it was? He had even, he had to admit, acquired a taste for it.

In the back of his cave, he blew the embers into flame and heated water, adding the old and sodden leaves to it. They barely changed the water's color now, even when he squeezed them. No, he would have to go back soon. There was little for him here.

Some of the ports of the templature were starting to rust, and these he rubbed with sand until they shined. He polished the surface, rubbing it with the chamois, then nicked his arm slightly, just below the elbow, and let a few drops of blood fall on the surface. These he rubbed over the surface with the chamois, until they were spread so thin over the entirety as to be invisible.

He went back to the mouth of the cave. Still the furnishers had not come. Flies had begun to gather on the hunks of flesh.

He slipped into his boots and began to walk the field, careful where he stepped. No, only bits and pieces, hardly anything recognizable, nothing large. A finger there, but stripped mostly of skin and the nail and bits of its meat gone. Even a full finger he might have been able to get the templature to do something with. He searched and prodded, but no, nothing.

Near the edge of the field, he caught sight of a group of furnishers. They were on the edge of the next field, the ditch lying between them and him, and there were more of them than he had ever seen in one place, several dozen at least. One was beckoning to him, or gesticulating in a way that he took to be beckoning. He still wasn't altogether sure how to interpret their gestures.

"Person," the creature started saying when it believed it had gotten his attention. "Person, hear and see!"

He walked to the edge of his field, heard the startling gasp of the furnishers as he crossed the field's border. He stood on his side of the ditch, looking over.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Query: Person buy?" the furnisher asked, the horde behind him

rumbling some muted variation of his words, like an echo.

"What do you have?" he asked. "Flesh?"

"Flesh," said the furnisher. "Flexible organs still capable of speech. Whole flesh."

"Whole flesh," he said. "What do you mean? A body?"

The furnisher flinched. "Query: person buy?" it said again. "Query: person pay well?"

"There is no occupant of this field?" he asked.

"No occupant of field," the other confirmed.

He slid down the bank of the ditch and up the other side and into the other field.

The body was fresh, as fresh as any he'd ever seen. It was a woman's body. It did not look like it had fallen; the limbs were intact, the bones seemingly unbroken, the lips blue, cuts and a few deeper wounds running up and down the arms and torso. He could not tell what had caused them.

"Where did you find this?" he asked.

"Field," it said. "A good find. Query: you pay well? Let it be written and beads exchanged."

He nodded and asked how much. When the envoy told him, he reached into his purse and fished out a handful of beads which he piled in a heap beside the body.

The furnisher refused to take them. It was, he remembered, too late, the haggling that they enjoyed as much as the beads themselves. And so he put most of the beads away and started dickering.

It was hard not to be impatient. Every moment they delayed, the body lost tractability. The skin was already lying differently on the bones. But he bargained back and forth with the envoy until, at last, they had a neat stack of beads and were satisfied.

He left them gathered together staring at the pile of beads. He passed the hook beneath the jaw of the corpse and up through the bottom of the mouth until he could see the tip of it glinting between the teeth. Fastening his cord to the hook's eye, he flung it over his shoul-

der. He dragged the body through the scattered flesh and along over the dips and swells and grasses and rocks and stones then down into the ditch and back up again and back to his own field and to his cave.

There, he slung the dead body onto the templature and worried it. He suppled its wounds, and infused a clear fluid into its veins. He washed the dirt from the body and cleared its skin of clotted gore. The lungs he inflated with a small bellows, inserted down the windpipe, watching the chest rise.

He struck the chest twice, muttering. The jets of the templature began to hiss lightly. He carefully opened the body cavity and reached in, slitting the integument surrounding the organs, and grasped the heart, slowly massaging it. He rearmed the templature, then withdrew his hand and sprayed foam into the incision.

He waited. At length the congealed blood became liquid and warm. It oozed out of the wounds, slowly becoming more and more pale, finally stopping. The fibers were called to action beneath the gelid breast and the nerves mimicked the instinct of life. The eyes shuttered open, like the eyes of a doll. They roiled independently in their sockets, only slowly coming to focus on him. The eyeballs were already losing their turgidity, he saw, beginning slowly to deflate.

"Awake," he said, "ye who lie dead."

The corpse tried to speak, sputtered, coughed out a plug of black bile. Blood flux welled from the hole beneath its chin. It swallowed, tried again.

"Dead?" its broken voice said with a kind of wonder, as if it didn't believe.

"Where are your treasures?" asked the man. "What are the mysteries of this place? Show me." He tugged on the hook run through the jaw.

"Who are you?" asked the corpse. "And what are you to me?"

"You must tell," said the man. "I control thee."

But the corpse was trying to arise, was grasping at his hands and arms. "Here," the corpse was saying. "I have been waiting for you. I

have spent many days hungry and waiting and now you are here. You have fallen from the sky. Lay yourself upon my templature and soon we will both have what we want." But its movements were muddy and sluggish, and it was easy for the man to shake it off.

This corpse has gone mad, he thought. Another part of him thought, This corpse thinks it is me and knows my thoughts.

"The mysteries," the man said again. "You shall tell me of them and then I shall be your voice to the living, to tell the living of what you were when you were alive."

The corpse stopped, hesitated. Slowly the mouth split wide and it began to make a choking noise which took the man some time to realize was laughter. "Ah, very good," she said, in between gasps. "They had me good and proper. Very good indeed."

He applied pressure to one temple with the chisel, breaking just through the bone, and she stopped laughing.

"Speak!" he commanded again.

For a long time she was silent. Just when he had decided she had become a simple corpse again, she spoke, "I shall tell you a story," she said.

"A story?" he said.

"A story," she said. "About a man and a woman, in which one could be the other and the other could be the one, and each to each, and both puppets of a handful of beads."

"What do you mean?" he asked, raising his eyebrows with surprise. "I do not understand this story. Is your only treasure beads? I warn you, do not try to deceive me."

"I do not deceive you," she said. "You deceive yourself."

"Speak clearly," he said. "No parables, no stories, no riddles, just plain speaking from beginning to end."

She raised her head slightly and moved her lips, and he, thinking she was whispering something, leaned closer. But when he did, she spat full in his face, with a force and vehemence he had never known the dead to possess. He stumbled back, wiping the spittle away. She tried to stand again, and this time sat up and slid jerkily off the templature. She took a step toward him, and suddenly stopped, then spoke, swaying.

"There, in the distant city, there came..." she said, and trailed off.

And then she collapsed in a heap. Despite his best efforts, she could not again be revived.

III

He made a fire and roasted her, the black smoke pouring out of the mouth of the cave. She would last him many months, he thought. As her skin split from the heat and her flesh bubbled, he jotted notes to himself about what she had said, what he had said and done. He had, he told himself, made progress, even if he had little, if anything, to show for it. Next time would be different.

When he judged her cooked he rolled her body out of the fire with his boots, left her steaming and smoking on the stone beside, the fat rendered from her flesh darkening the cave floor. Furnishers, he saw, had gathered around the mouth of the cave, eager and attentive, but unwilling to disturb him.

"Person: good flesh," one of them called.

"Yes," he said. "Very good flesh."

Later he would cut and joint her. Some could be eaten immediately, the rest he should carefully preserve. No doubt parts would have to be cooked longer. It was just meat, he told himself, meat like any other. Though that was not, he knew inside, why he chose to partake of it.

"This was a good one," he said again, turning to the mouth of the cave. "Can you bring me another as good?"

"Query: As good?"

"As whole," he said. "As complete."

The furnisher envoy shivered. What did that mean? Was it the same furnisher that he had spoken to in the fields or did they take turns serving as envoy? He couldn't tell one from another.

"Query: Any?" it said.

"What?" he asked, confused.

"Query: Any corpse?" it asked.

"Any corpse?" he said. "I suppose so, as long as it's a whole corpse. As long as it's a good one."

"Any corpse," it said.

"Yes, any."

It turned to consult with the others. They conversed for a long while in their odd language. They kept gesticulating, arguing among themselves, or so it seemed to him. Finally the envoy turned back.

"Please to proceed out of cave," the envoy said.

"Why?" he said. "You know where to find a corpse?"

"Yes," it said. "Any corpse."

"As good as this?" he said, gesturing to the charred meat beside him.

"Any corpse," it said, and flinched. It raised its armature in a way that revealed a series of barbs on the dark body enclosed within, "Person, please out of cave."

Andromeda Among the Stones

Caitlín R. Kiernan

"I cannot think of the deep sea without shuddering..."

—H. P. Lovecraft

1.

October 1914

"IS SHE REALLY and truly dead, Father?" the girl asked, and Machen Dandridge, already an old man at fifty-one, looked up at the low buttermilk sky again and closed the black book clutched in his hands. He'd carved the tall headstone himself, the marker for his wife's grave there by the relentless Pacific, black shale obelisk with its hasty death's head, and his daughter stepped gingerly around the raw earth and pressed her fingers against the monument.

"Why did you not give her to the sea?" she asked. "She always wanted to go down to the sea at the end. She often told me so."

"I've given her back to the earth instead," Machen told her and rubbed at his eyes. The cold sunlight through thin clouds enough to make his head ache, his daughter's voice like thunder, and he shut his aching eyes for a moment. Just a little comfort in the almost blackness trapped behind his lids, parchment skin too insubstantial to bring the

balm of genuine darkness, void to match the shades of his soul, and Machen whispered one of the prayers from the heavy black book and then looked at the grave again.

"Well, that's what she always said," the girl said again, running her fingertips across the rough-hewn stone.

"Things changed at the end, child. The sea wouldn't have taken her. I had to give her back to the earth."

"She said it was a sacrilege, planting people in the ground like wheat, like kernels of corn."

"She did?" and he glanced anxiously over his left shoulder, looking back across the waves the wind was making in the high and yellow-brown grass, the narrow trail leading back down to the tall and brooding house that he'd built for his wife twenty-four years ago, back towards the cliffs and the place where the sea and sky blurred seamlessly together.

"Yes, she did. She said only barbarians and heathens stick their dead in the ground like turnips."

"I had no choice," Machen replied, wondering if that was exactly the truth or only something he'd like to believe. "The sea wouldn't take her, and I couldn't bring myself to burn her."

"Only heathens burn their dead," his daughter said disapprovingly and leaned close to the obelisk, setting her ear against the charcoal shale.

"Do you hear anything?"

"No, Father. Of course not. She's dead. You just said so."

"Yes," Machen whispered. "She is." And the wind whipping across the hillside made a hungry, waiting sound that told him it was time for them to head back to the house.

This is where I stand, at the bottom gate, and I hold the key to the abyss...

"But it's better that way," the girl said, her ear still pressed tight against the obelisk. "She couldn't stand the pain any longer. It was cutting her up inside."

"She told you that?"

"She didn't have to tell me that. I saw it in her eyes."

The ebony key to the first day and the last, the key to the moment when

the stars wink out, one by one, and the sea heaves its rotting belly at the empty, sagging sky.

"You're only a child," he said. "You shouldn't have had to see such things. Not yet."

"It can't very well be helped now," she answered and stepped away from her mother's grave, one hand cupping her ear like maybe it had begun to hurt. "You know that, old man."

"I do," and he almost said her name then, Meredith, his mother's name, but the wind was too close, the listening wind and the salt-and-semen stink of the breakers crashing against the cliffs. "But I can wish it were otherwise."

"If wishes were horses, beggars would ride."

And Machen watched silently as Meredith Dandridge knelt in the grass and placed her handful of wilting wildflowers on the freshly turned soil; if it were spring instead of autumn, he thought, there would be dandelions and poppies. If it were spring instead of autumn, the woman wrapped in a quilt and nailed up inside a pine-board casket would still be breathing. If it were spring, they would not be alone now, him and his daughter at the edge of the world. The wind teased the girl's long yellow hair, and the sun glittered dimly in her warm green eyes.

The key I have accepted full in the knowledge of its weight.

"Remember me," Meredith whispered, either to her dead mother or something else, and he didn't ask her which.

"We should be heading back now," he said and glanced over his shoulder again.

"So soon? Is that all you're going to read from the book? Is that all of it?"

"Yes, that's all of it, for now," though there would be more, later, when the harvest moon swelled orange-red and bloated and hung itself in the wide California night. When the women came to dance, then there would be other words to say, to keep his wife in the ground and the gate shut for at least another year.

The weight that is the weight of all salvation, the weight that holds the line against the last, unending night.

"It's better this way," his daughter said again, standing up, brush-

ing the dirt off her stockings, from the hem of her black dress. "There was so little left of her."

"Don't talk of that here," Machen replied, more sternly than he'd intended, but Meredith didn't seem to have noticed or, if she'd noticed, not to have minded the tone of her father's voice.

"I will remember her the way she was before, when she was still beautiful."

"That's what she would want," he said and took his daughter's hand. "That's the way I'll remember her, as well," but he knew that was a lie, as false as any lie any living man ever uttered. Knew that he would always see his wife as the writhing, twisted thing she'd become at the last, the way she was after the gates were almost thrown open, and she placed herself on the threshold.

The frozen weight of the sea, the burning weight of starlight and my final breath. I hold the line. I hold the ebony key against the last day of all.

And Machen Dandridge turned his back on his wife's grave and led his daughter down the dirt and gravel path, back to the house waiting for them like a curse.

2.
November 1914

Meredith Dandridge lay very still in her big bed, her big room with its high ceiling and no pictures hung on the walls, and she listened to the tireless sea slamming itself against the rocks. The sea to take the entire world apart one gritty speck at a time, the sea that was here first and would be here long after the continents had finally been weathered down to so much slime and sand. She knew this because her father had read to her from his heavy black book, the book that had no name, the book that she couldn't ever read for herself or the demons would come for her in the night. And she knew, too, because of the books he had *given* her, her books—*Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* and *The World Before the Deluge* and *Atlantis and Lost Lemuria*. Everything above the waves on borrowed time, her father had said again and again, waiting for the day when the sea rose once more and

drowned the land beneath its smothering, salty bosom, and the highest mountains and deepest valleys will become a playground for sea serpents and octopi and schools of herring. Forests to become Poseidon's orchards, her father said, though she knew Poseidon wasn't the true name of the god-thing at the bottom of the ocean, just a name some dead man gave it thousands of years ago.

"Should I read you a story tonight, Merry?" her dead mother asked, sitting right there in the chair beside the bed. She smelled like fish and mud, even though they'd buried her in the dry ground at the top of the hill behind the house. Meredith didn't look at her, because she'd spent so much time already trying to remember her mother's face the way it was *before* and didn't want to see the ruined face the ghost was wearing like a mask. As bad as the face her brother now wore, worse than that, and Meredith shrugged and pushed the blankets back a little.

"If you can't sleep, it might help," her mother said with a voice like kelp stalks swaying slowly in deep water.

"It might," Meredith replied, staring at a place where the wallpaper had begun to peel free of one of the walls, wishing there were a candle in the room or an oil lamp so the ghost would leave her alone. "And it might not."

"I could read to you from Hans Christian Andersen, or one of Grimm's tales," her mother sighed. "'The Little Mermaid' or 'The Fisherman and his Wife'?"

"You could tell me what it's like in Hell," the girl replied.

"Dear, I don't have to tell you that," her ghost mother whispered, her voice gone suddenly regretful and sad. "I know I don't have to ever tell you that."

"There might be different hells," Meredith said. "This one, and the one father sent you away to, and the one Avery is lost inside. No one ever said there could only be one, did they? A hell for the dead German soldiers and another for the French, a hell for Christians and another for the Jews. And maybe another for all the pagans—"

"Your father didn't send me anywhere, child. I crossed the threshold of my own accord."

"So I would be alone in *this* hell."

The ghost clicked its sharp teeth together, and Meredith could hear the anemone tendrils between its iridescent fish eyes quickly withdrawing into the hollow places in her mother's decaying skull.

"I could read you a poem," her mother said hopefully. "I could sing you a song."

"It isn't all fire and brimstone, is it? Not the hell where you are? It's blacker than night and cold as ice, isn't it, mother?"

"Did he think it would save me to put me in the earth? Does the old fool think it will bring me back across, like Persephone?"

Too many questions, hers and her mother's, and for a moment Meredith Dandridge didn't answer the ghost, kept her eyes on the shadowy wallpaper strips, the pinstripe wall, wishing the sun would rise and pour warm and gold as honey through the drapes.

"I crossed the threshold of my *own* accord," the ghost said again, and Meredith wondered if it thought she didn't hear the first time. Or maybe it was something her mother needed to believe and might stop believing if she stopped repeating it. "Someone had to do it."

"It didn't have to be you."

The wind whistled wild and shrill around the eaves of the house, invisible lips pressed to a vast, invisible instrument, and Meredith shivered and pulled the covers up to her chin again.

"There was no one else. It wouldn't take your brother. The one who wields the key cannot be a man. You know that, Merry. Avery knew that, too."

"There are other women," Meredith said, speaking through gritted teeth, not wanting to start crying but the tears already hot in her eyes. "It could have been someone else. It didn't have to be my mother."

"Some other child's mother, then?" the ghost asked. "Some other mother's daughter?"

"Go back to your hell," Meredith said, still looking at the wall, spitting out the words like poison. "Go back to your hole in the ground and tell your fairy tales to the worms. Tell them 'The Fisherman and his Wife.'"

"You have to be strong now, Merry. You have to listen to your father, and you have to be ready. I wasn't strong enough."

And finally she did turn to face her mother, what was left of her

mother's face, the scuttling things nesting in her tangled hair, the silver scales and barnacles, the stinging anemone crown, and Meredith Dandridge didn't flinch or look away.

"One day," she said, "I'll take that damned black book of his, and I'll toss it into the stove. I'll take it, mother, and toss it into the hearth, and then they can come out of the sea and drag us both away—"

But then her mother cried out and came apart like a breaking wave against the shingle, water poured from the tin pail that had given it shape, her flesh gone suddenly as clear and shimmering as glass, before she drained away and leaked through the cracks between the floorboards. The girl reached out and dipped her fingers into the shallow pool left behind in the wicker seat of the chair. The water was cold and smelled unclean. And then she lay awake until dawn, listening to the ocean, to all the unthinking noises a house makes in the small hours of a night.

3.
May 1914

Avery Dandridge had his father's eyes, but someone else's soul to peer out through them, and to his sister he was hope that there might be a life somewhere beyond the rambling house beside the sea. Five years her senior, he'd gone away to school in San Francisco for a while, almost a year, because their mother wanted him to. But there had been an incident, and he was sent home again, transgressions only spoken of in whispers and nothing anyone ever bothered to explain to Meredith, but that was fine with her. She only cared that he was back, and she was that much less alone.

"Tell me about the earthquake," she asked him, one day not long after he'd returned, the two of them walking together along the narrow beach below the cliffs, sand the color of coal dust, noisy gulls and driftwood like bones washed in by the tide. "Tell me all about the fire."

"The earthquake? Merry, that was eight *years* ago. You were still just a baby, that was such long time ago," and then he picked up a shell

and turned it over in his hand, brushing away some of the dark sand stuck to it. "People don't like to talk about the earthquake anymore. I never heard them say much about it."

"Oh," she said, not sure what to say next but still full of questions. "Father says it was a sign, a sign from—"

"Maybe you shouldn't believe everything he says, Merry. It was an earthquake." And she felt a thrill then, like a tiny jolt of electricity rising up her spine and spreading out across her scalp, that anyone, much less Avery, would question their father and suggest she do likewise.

"Have you stopped believing in the signs?" she asked, breathless. "Is that what you learned in school?"

"I didn't learn much of anything important in school," he replied and showed her the shell in his palm. Hardly as big around as a nickel, but peaked in the center like a Chinaman's hat, radial lines of chestnut brown. "It's pretty," she said as he placed it in her palm.

"What's it called?"

"It's a limpet," he replied, because Avery knew all about shells and fish and the fossils in the cliffs, things he'd learned from their father's books and not from school. "It's a shield limpet. The jackmackerel carry them into battle when they fight the eels."

Meredith laughed out loud at that last part, and he laughed, too, then sat down on a rock at the edge of a wide tidepool. She stood there beside him, still inspecting the shell in her hand, turning it over and over again. The concave underside of the limpet was smoother than silk and would be white if not for the faintest iridescent hint of blue.

"That's not true," she said. "Everyone knows the jackmackerel and the eels are friends."

"Sure they are," Avery said. "Everyone knows that," but he was staring out to sea now and didn't turn to look at her. In a moment, she slipped the shell into a pocket of her sweater and sat down on the rock next to him.

"Do you see something out there?" she asked, and he nodded his head, but didn't speak. The wind rushed cold and damp across the beach and painted ripples on the surface of the pool at their feet; the

wind and the waves seemed louder than usual, and Meredith wondered if that meant a storm was coming.

"Not a storm," Avery said, and that didn't surprise her because he often knew what she was thinking before she said it. "A war's coming, Merry."

"Oh yes, the jackmackerel and the eels," Merry laughed and squinted towards the horizon, trying to see whatever it was that had attracted her brother's attention. "The squid and the mussels."

"Don't be silly. Everyone knows that the squid and the mussels are great friends," and that made her laugh again. But Avery didn't laugh, looked away from the sea and stared down instead at the scuffed toes of his boots dangling a few inches above the water.

"There's never been a war like the one that's coming," he said after a while. "All the nations of the earth at each other's throats, Merry, and when we're done with all the killing, no one will be left to stand against the sea."

She took a very deep breath, the clean, salty air to clear her head, and began to pick at a barnacle on the rock.

"If that were true," she said, "Father would have told us. He would have shown us the signs."

"He doesn't see them. He doesn't dream the way I do."

"But you told him?"

"I tried. But he thinks it's something they put in my head at school. He thinks it's some kind of trick to make him look away."

Merry stopped picking at the barnacle because it was making her fingers sore, and they'd be bleeding soon if she kept it up. She decided it was better to watch the things trapped in the tidepool, the little garden stranded there until the sea came back to claim it. Periwinkle snails and hermit crabs wearing stolen shells, crimson starfish and starfish the shape and color of sunflowers.

"He thinks they're using me to make him look the other way, to catch him off his guard," Avery whispered, his voice almost lost in the rising wind. "He thinks I'm being set against him."

"Avery, I don't believe Father would say that about you."

"He didn't have to say it," and her brother's dark and shining eyes gazed out at the sea and sky again.

"We should be heading back soon, shouldn't we? The tide will be coming in before long," Meredith said, noticing how much higher up the beach the waves were reaching than the last time she'd looked. Another half hour and the insatiable ocean would be battering itself against the rough shale cliffs at their backs.

"'Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,'" Avery whispered, closing his eyes tight, and the words coming from his pale, thin lips sounded like someone else, someone old and tired that Meredith had never loved. "'Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep and full of voices, slowly rose and plunged roaring, and all the wave was in a flame—'"

"What's that?" she asked, interrupting because she didn't want to hear anymore. "Is it from Father's book?"

"No, it's not," he replied, sounding more like himself again, more like her brother. He opened his eyes, and a tear rolled slowly down his wind-chapped cheek. "It's just something they taught me at school."

"How can a wave be in flame? Is it supposed to be a riddle?" she asked, and he shook his head.

"No," he said and wiped at his face with his hands. "It's nothing at all, just a silly bit of poetry they made us memorize. School is full of silly poetry."

"Is that why you came home?"

"We ought to start back," he said, glancing quickly over his shoulder at the high cliffs, the steep trail leading back up towards the house. "Can't have the tide catching us with our trousers down, now can we?"

"I don't even wear trousers," Merry said glumly, still busy thinking about that ninth wave, the fire and the water, and Avery put an arm around her and held her close to him for a moment while the advancing sea dragged itself eagerly back and forth across the moss-scabbed rocks.

4.
January 1915

Meredith sat alone on the floor in the hallway, the narrow hall connecting the foyer to the kitchen and a bathroom, and then farther along, all the way back at the very rear of the house, this tall door that was always locked. The tarnished brass key always hung on its ring upon her father's belt, and she pressed her ear against the wood and strained to hear anything at all. The wood was damp and very cold, and the smell of saltwater and mildew seeped freely through the space between the bottom of the door and the floor, between the door and the jamb. Once-solid redwood that had long since begun to rot from the continual moisture, the ocean's breath to rust the hinges so the door cried out like a stepped-on cat every time it was opened or closed. Even as a very small child, Meredith had feared this door, even in the days before she'd started to understand what lay in the deep place beneath her father's house.

Outside, the icy winter wind howled, and she shivered and pulled her grey wool shawl tighter about her shoulders; the very last thing her mother had made for her, that shawl. Almost as much hatred in Merry for the wind as for the sea, but at least it smothered the awful thumps and moans that came, day and night, from the attic room where her father had locked Avery away in June.

"There are breaches between the worlds, Merry," he had said, a few days before he picked the lock on the hallway door with the sharpened tip-end of a buttonhook and went down to the deep place by himself. "Rifts, fractures, ruptures. If they can't be closed, they have to be guarded against the things on the other side that don't belong here."

"Father says it's a portal," she'd replied, closing the book she'd been reading, a dusty, dog-eared copy of Franz Unger's *Primitive World.*

Her brother had laughed a dry, humourless laugh and shaken his head, nervously watching the fading day through the parlour windows. "Portals are built on purpose, to be used. These things are accidents, at best, casualties of happenstance, tears in space when one world passes much too near another."

"Well, that's not what Father says."

"Read your book, Merry. One day you'll understand. One day soon, when you're not a child anymore and he loses his hold on you."

And she'd frowned, sighed, and opened her book again, opening it at random to one of the strangely melancholy lithographs — *The Period of the Muschelkalk [Middle Trias]*. A violent seascape and in the foreground a reef jutted above the waves, crowded with algae-draped driftwood branches and the shells of stranded mollusca and crinoidea, something like a crocodile that the author called *Nothosaurus giganteus* clinging to the reef so it wouldn't be swept back into the storm-tossed depths. Overhead, the night sky was a turbulent mass of clouds with the small, white moon, full or near enough to full, peeking through to illuminate the ancient scene.

"You mean planets?" she'd asked Avery. "You mean moons and stars?"

"No, I mean *worlds*. Now, read your book, and don't ask so many questions."

Meredith thought she heard creaking wood, her father's heavy footsteps, the dry ruffling of cloth rubbing against cloth, and she stood quickly, not wanting to be caught listening at the door again, was busy straightening her rumpled dress when she realized that he was standing there in the hall behind her, instead. Her mistake, thinking he'd gone to the deep place, when he was somewhere else all along, in his library or the attic room with Avery or outside braving the cold to visit her mother's grave on the hill.

"What are you doing, child?" he asked her gruffly and tugged at his beard; there were streaks of silver-grey that weren't there only a couple of months before, scars from the night they lost her mother, his wife, the night the demons tried to squeeze in through the tear and Ellen Dandridge had tried to block their way. His face grown years older in the space of weeks, dark crescents beneath his eyes like bruises, the deep creases in his forehead, and he brushed his daughter's blonde hair from her eyes.

"Would it have been different, if you'd believed Avery from the start?"

For a moment he didn't reply, and the silence, his face set as hard and perfectly unreadable as stone, made her want to strike him, made

her wish she could kick open the rotting, sea-damp door and hurl him screaming down the stairs to whatever was waiting for them both in the deep place.

"I don't know, Meredith. But I had to trust the book, and I had to believe the signs in the heavens."

"You were too arrogant, old man. You almost gave away the whole wide world because you couldn't admit you might be wrong."

"You should be thankful that your mother can't hear you, young lady, using that tone of voice with your own father."

Meredith turned and looked at the tall door again, the symbols drawn on the wood in whitewash and blood.

"She can hear me," Meredith told him. "She talks to me almost every night. She hasn't gone as far away as you think."

"I'm still your father, and you're still a child who can't even begin to understand what's at stake, what's always pushing at the other side of—"

"—the gate?" she asked, finishing for him, and she put one hand flat against the door, the upper of its two big panels, and leaned all her weight against it. "What happens next time? Do you know that, Father? How much longer do we have left, or haven't the constellations gotten around to telling you that yet?"

"Don't mock me, Meredith."

"Why not?" and she stared back at him over her shoulder, without taking her hand off the door. "Will it damn me faster? Will it cause more men to die in the trenches? Will it cause Avery more pain than he's in now?"

"I was given the book," he growled at her, his stony face flashing to bitter anger, and at least that gave Meredith some mean scrap of satisfaction. "I was shown the way to this place. They entrusted the gate to me, child. The gods—"

"—must be even bigger fools than you, old man. Now shut up, and leave me alone."

Machen Dandridge raised his right hand to strike her, then, his big-knuckled hand like a hammer of flesh and bone, iron-meat hammer and anvil to beat her as thin and friable as the veil between Siamese universes.

"You'll need me," she said, not recoiling from the fire in his dark eyes, standing her ground. "You can't take my place. Even if you weren't a coward, you couldn't take my place."

"You've become a wicked child," he said, slowly lowering his hand until it hung useless at his side.

"Yes, Father, I have. I've become a *very* wicked child. You'd best pray that I've become wicked enough."

And he didn't reply, no words left in him, but walked quickly away down the long hall towards the foyer and his library, his footsteps loud as distant gunshots, loud as the beating of her heart, and Meredith removed her hand from the door. It burned very slightly, pain like a healing bee sting, and when she looked at her palm there was something new there, a fat and shiny swelling as black and round and smooth as the soulless eye of a shark.

5.
February 1915

In his dreams, Machen Dandridge stands at the edge of the sea and watches the firelight reflected in the roiling grey clouds above Russia and Austria and East Prussia, smells the coppery stink of Turkish and German blood, the life leaking from the bullet holes left in the Serbian Archduke and his wife. Machen would look away if he knew how, wouldn't see what he can only see too late to make any difference. One small man set adrift and then cast up on the shingle of the cosmos, filled to bursting with knowledge and knowing nothing at all. Canon fire and thunder, the breakers against the cliff side and the death rattle of soldiers beyond counting.

This is where I stand, at the bottom gate, and I hold the key to the abyss...

"A *world* war, father," Avery says. "Something without precedent. I can't even find words to describe the things I've seen."

"A world war, without precedent?" Machen replies skeptically and raises one eyebrow, then goes back to reading his star charts. "Napoleon just might disagree with you there, young man, and Alexander, as well."

"No, you don't understand what I'm—"

And the fire in the sky grows brighter, coalescing into a whip of red-gold scales and ebony spines, the dragon's tail to lash the damned, and *Every one of us is damned,* Machen thinks. *Every one of us, from the bloody start of time.*

"I have the texts, Avery, and the aegis of the seven, and all the old ways. I cannot very well set that all aside because you've been having nightmares, now can I?"

"I know these things, Father. I know them like I know my own heart, like I know the number of steps down to the deep place."

"There is a trouble brewing in Coma Berenices," his wife whispers, her eye pressed to the eyepiece of the big telescope in his library. "Something like a shadow—"

"She says that later," Avery tells him. "That hasn't happened yet, but it will. But you won't listen to her, either."

And Machen Dandridge turns his back on the sea and the dragon, on the battlefields and the burning cities, looking back towards the house he built twenty-five years ago; the air in the library seems suddenly very close, too warm, too thick. He loosens his paper collar and stares at his son sitting across the wide mahogany desk from him.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, boy," he says, and Avery sighs loudly and runs his fingers through his brown hair.

"Mother isn't even at the window now. That's still two weeks from now," and it's true that no one's standing at the telescope. Machen rubs his eyes and reaches for his spectacles. "By then, it'll be too late. It may be too late already," Avery says.

"Listen to him, Father," Meredith begs with her mother's voice, and then she lays a small, wilted bouquet of autumn wildflowers on Ellen Dandridge's grave; the smell of the broken earth at the top of the hill is not so different from the smell of the trenches.

"I did listen to him, Merry."

"You let him talk. You know the difference."

"Did I ever tell you about the lights in the sky the night that you were born?"

"Yes, Father. A hundred times."

"There were no lights at your brother's birth."

Behind him, the sea makes a sound like a giant rolling over in its sleep, and Machen looks away from the house again, stares out across the surging black Pacific. There are the carcasses of whales and sea lions and a billion fish, bloated carcasses of things even he doesn't know the names for, floating in the surf, and scarlet-eyed night birds swoop down to eat their fill of carrion. The water is so thick with dead things and maggots and blood that soon there will be no water left at all.

"The gate chooses the key," his wife says sternly, sadly, standing at the open door leading down to the deep place beneath the house, the bottomless, phosphorescent pool at the foot of the rickety steps. The short pier and the rock rising up from those depths, the little island with its cave and shackles. "You can't change that part, no matter what the seven have given you."

"It wasn't me sent Avery down there, Ellen."

"It wasn't either one of us. But neither of us listened to him, so maybe it's the same as if we did."

The sea as thick as buttermilk, buttermilk and blood beneath a rotten moon, and the dragon's tail flicks through the stars.

"Writing the history of the end of the world," Meredith says, standing at the telescope, peering into the eyepiece, turning first this knob, then that one, trying to bring something in the night sky into sharper focus. "That's what he kept saying, anyway. 'I am writing the history of the end of the world. I'm writing the history of the future.' Father, did you know that there's trouble in Coma Berenices?"

"Was that you?" he asks her. "Was that you or was that your mother?"

"Is there any difference? Do you know the difference?"

"Are these visions, Merry? Are these terrible visions that I may yet hope to affect?"

"Will you keep him locked in that room forever?" she asks, not answering his question, not even taking her eye from the telescope.

Before his wife leaves the hallway, before she steps onto the unsteady landing at the top of the stairs, she kisses Meredith on the top of her head and then glares at her husband, her eyes like judgment on the last day of all, the eyes of seraphim and burning swords. The diseased sea slams against the cliffs, dislodging chunks of shale, silt gone to stone when the great reptiles roamed the planet and the gods

still had countless revolutions and upheavals to attend to before the beginning of the tragedy of mankind.

"Machen," his wife says. "If you had listened, had you allowed me to listen, everything might have been different. The war, what's been done to Avery, all of it. If you'd but *listened*."

And the dream rolls on and on and on behind his eyes, down the stairs and to the glowing water, his wife alone in the tiny boat, rowing across the pool to the rocky island far beneath the house. The hemorrhaging, pus-colored sea throwing itself furiously against the walls of the cavern, wanting in, and it's always only a matter of time. Meredith standing on the pier behind him, chanting the prayers he's taught her, the prayers to keep the gate from opening before Ellen reaches that other shore.

The yellow-green light beneath the pool below the house wavers, then grows brighter by degrees.

The dragon's tail flicks at the suicidal world.

In his attic, Avery screams with the new mouth the gate gave him before it spit the boy, twisted and insane, back into this place, this time.

The oars dipping again and again into the brilliant, glowing water, the creak of the rusted oarlocks, old nails grown loose in decaying wood, and the shafts of light from the pool playing across the uneven walls of the cavern.

The dragon opens one blistered eye.

And Ellen Dandridge steps out of the boat onto the island, and she doesn't look back at her husband and daughter.

"Something like a shadow," Meredith says, taking her right eye from the telescope and looking across the room at her brother, who isn't sitting in the chair across from Machen.

"It's not a shadow," Avery doesn't tell her, and goes back to the things he has to write down in his journals before there's no time left.

On the island, the gate tears itself open, the dragon's eye, angel eye and the unspeakable face of the titan sleeper in an unnamed, sunken city, tearing itself wide to see if she's the one it's called down or if it's some other. The summoned or the trespasser. The invited or the interloper. And Machen knows from the way the air has begun to shimmer and sing that the sleeper doesn't like what it sees.

"I stand at the gate and hold the key," she says. "You know my name, and I have come to hold the line. I have come only that you might not pass—"

"Don't look, Merry. Close your eyes," and he holds his daughter close to him as the air stops singing, as it begins to sizzle and pop and burn.

The waves against the shore.

The dragon's tail across the sky.

The empty boat pulled down into the shimmering pool.

Something glimpsed through a telescope.

The ribsy, omnivorous dogs of war.

And Machen woke in his bed, a storm lashing fiercely at the windows, the lightning exploding out there like mortar shells, and the distant *thump thump thump* of his lost son from the attic. He didn't close his eyes again, lay very still, sweating and listening to the rain and the thumping, until the sun rose somewhere behind the clouds to turn the black to cheerless, leaden grey.

6.
August 1889

After his travels, after Baghdad and the ruins of Ninevah and Babylon, after the hidden mosque in Reza'lyah and the peculiar artefacts he'd collected on the southernmost shore of Lake Urmia, Machen Dandridge went west to California. In the summer of 1889, he married Ellen Douglas-Winslow, black-sheep daughter of a fine old Boston family, and together they traveled by train, the smoking iron horses and steel rails that his own father had made his fortune from, all the way to the bustling squalor and Nob Hill sanctuaries of San Francisco. For a time they took up residence in a modest house on Russian Hill, while Machen taught his wife the things that he'd learned in the East —archaeology and astrology, Hebrew and Islamic mysticism, the Talmud and Quran, the secrets of the terrible black book that had been given to him by a blind and leprous mullah. Ellen had disgraced her family at an early age by claiming the abilities of a medium and then

backing up her claims with extravagant séances and spectacular ectoplasmic displays, and Machen found in her an eager pupil.

"Why would he have given the book to you?" Ellen asked skeptically, the first time Machen had shown it to her, the first time he'd taken it from its iron and leather case in her presence. "If it's what you say it is, why would he have given it to anyone?"

"Because, my dear, I had a pistol pressed against his rotten skull," Machen had replied, unwrapping the book, slowly peeling back the layers of lambskin it was wrapped in. "That and knowledge he'd been searching for his entire life. It was a fair trade."

And just as the book had led him back from Asia to America and on to California, the brittle, parchment compass of its pages had shown him the way north along the coast to the high cliffs north of Anchor Bay. That first trip, he left Ellen behind, traveling with only the company of a Miwok Indian guide who claimed knowledge of "a hole in the world." But when they finally left the shelter of the redwood forest and stood at the edge of a vast and undulating sea of pampas grass stretching away towards the Pacific, the Miwok had refused to go any farther. No amount of money or talk could persuade him to approach the cliffs waiting beyond the grass, and so Machen continued on alone.

Beneath the hot summer sun, the low, rolling hills seemed to go on forever, and the gulls and a pair of red-tailed hawks screamed at him like harpies warning him away, screeching threats or alarum from the endless cornflower sky. But he found it, finally, the "hole in the world," right where the Miwok guide had said that he would, maybe fifty yards from the cliffs.

From what he'd taught himself of geology, Machen guessed it to be the collapsed roof of a cavern, an opening no more than five or six feet across, granting access to an almost vertical chimney eroded through tilted beds of limestone and shale and probably connecting to the sea somewhere in the darkness below. He dropped a large pebble into the hole and listened and counted as it fell, ticking off the seconds until it splashed faintly, confirming his belief that the cavern must be connected to the sea. A musty, briny smell wafted up from the hole, uninviting, sickly, and though there was climbing equip-

ment in his pack, and he was competent with ropes and knots and had, more than once, descended treacherous, crumbling shafts into ancient tombs and wells, Machen Dandridge only stood there at the entrance, dropping stones and listening to the eventual splashes. He stared into the hole and, after a while, could discern a faint but unmistakable light, not the fading sunlight getting in from some cleft in the cliff face, but light like a glass of absinthe, the sort of light he'd imagined abyssal creatures that never saw the sun might make to shine their way through the murk.

It wasn't what he'd expected, from what was written in the black book, no towering gate of horn and ivory, no arch of gold and silver guarded by angels or demons or beings men had never fashioned names for, just this unassuming hole in the ground. He sat in the grass, watching the sunset burning day to night, wondering if the Miwok had deserted him. Wondering if the quest had been a fool's errand from the very start, and he'd wasted so many years of his life and so much of his inheritance chasing connections and truths that only existed because he wished to see them. By dark, the light shone up through the hole like some unearthly torch, taunting or reassuring but beckoning him forward. Promising there was more to come.

"What is it you think you will find?" the old priest had asked after he'd handed over the book. "More to the point, what is it you think will find *you*?"

Not a question he could answer then and not one he could answer sitting there with the roar of the surf in his ears and the stars speckling the sky overhead. The question that Ellen had asked him again and again, and always he'd found some way to deflect her asking. But he *knew* the answer, sewn up somewhere deep within his soul, even if he'd never been able to find the words. Proof that the world did not end at his fingertips or with the unreliable data of his eyes and ears or the lies and half-truths men had written down in science and history books, that everything he'd ever seen was merely a tattered curtain waiting to be drawn back so that some more indisputable light might, at last, shine through.

"Is that what you were seeking, Mr. Dandridge?" and Machen had turned quickly, his heart pounding as he reached for the pistol at his

hip, only to find the old Indian watching him from the tall, rustling grass a few feet away. "Is *that* the end of your journey?" and the guide pointed at the hole.

"I thought you were afraid to comé here?" Machen asked, annoyed at the interruption, sitting back down beside the hole, looking again into the unsteady yellow-green light spilling out of the earth.

"I was," the Miwok replied. "But the ghost of my grandfather came to me and told me he was ashamed of me, that I was a coward for allowing you to come to this evil place alone. He has promised to protect me from the demons."

"The ghost of your grandfather?" Machen laughed and shook his head, then dropped another pebble into the hole.

"Yes. He is watching us both now, but he also wishes we would leave soon. I can show you the way back to the trail."

The key I have accepted full in the knowledge of its weight.

"You're a brave man," Machen said. "Or another lunatic."

"All brave men are lunatics," the Indian said and glanced nervously at the hole, the starry indigo sky, the cliff and the invisible ocean, each in its turn. "Sane men do not go looking for their deaths."

"Is that all I've found here? My death?"

A long moment of anxious silence from the guide, broken only by the ceaseless interwoven roar of the waves and the wind, and then he took a step back away from the hole, deeper into the sheltering pampas grass.

"I cannot not say what you have found in this place, Mr. Dandridge. My grandfather says I should not speak its name."

"Is that so? Well, then," and he stood, rubbing his aching eyes and brushed the dust from his pants. "You show me the way back and forget you ever brought me out here. Tell your grandfather's poor ghost that I will not hold you responsible for whatever it is I'm meant to find at the bottom of that pit."

"My grandfather hears you," the Miwok said. "He says you are a brave man and a lunatic, and that I should kill you now, before you do the things you will do in the days to come. Before you set the world against itself."

Machen drew his Colt, cocked the hammer with his thumb, and

stood staring into the gloom at the Indian.

"But I will not kill you," the Miwok said. "That is *my* choice, and I have chosen not to take your life. But I will pray it is not a decision I will regret later. We should go now."

"After you," Machen said, smiling through the quaver in his voice that he hoped the guide couldn't hear, his heart racing and cold sweat starting to drip from his face despite the night air. And, without another word, the Indian turned and disappeared into the arms of the whispering grass and the August night.

7.
July 1914

When she was very sure that her father had shut the double doors to his study and that her mother was asleep, when the only sounds were the sea and the wind, the inconstant, shifting noises that all houses make after dark, the mice in the walls, Meredith slipped out of bed and into her flannel dressing gown. The floor was cool against her bare feet, cool but not cold. She lit a candle and then eased the heavy bedroom door shut behind her and went as quickly and quietly as she could to the cramped stairwell leading from the second story to the attic door. At the top, she sat down on the landing and held her breath, listening, praying that no one had heard her, that neither her father nor mother, nor the both of them together, were already trying to find her.

There were no sounds at all from the other side of the narrow attic door. She set the candlestick down and leaned close to it, pressing her lips against the wood, feeling the rough grain through the varnish against her flesh.

"Avery?" she whispered. "Avery, can you hear me?"

And at first there was no reply from the attic, and she took a deep breath and waited a while, waiting for her parents' angry or worried footsteps, waiting for one of them to begin shouting her name from the house below.

But there were no footsteps, and no one called her name.

"*Avery*? Can you hear me? It's *me*, Merry."

That time there was a sudden thumping and a heavy dragging sort of a sound from the other side of the attic door. A body pulling itself roughly, painfully across the pine-board floor towards her, and she closed her eyes and waited for it. Finally, there was a loud thud against the door, and she opened her eyes again. Avery was trying to talk, trying to answer her, but there was nothing familiar or coherent in his ruined voice.

"Hold on," she whispered to him. "I brought a writing pad," and she took it out of a pocket of her gown, the pad and a pencil. "Don't try to talk any more. I'll pass this beneath the door to you, and you can write what you want to say. Knock once if you understand what I'm telling you, Avery."

Nothing for almost a full minute and then a single knock so violent that the door shivered on its hinges, so loud she was sure it would bring her parents running to investigate.

"Not so *loud*, Avery," she whispered. "They'll hear us," and now Meredith had begun to notice the odor on the landing, the odor leaking from the attic. Either she'd been much too nervous to notice it at first or her brother had brought it with him when he'd crawled over to the door. Dead fish and boiling cabbage, soured milk and strawberry jam, the time she'd come across the carcass of a grey whale calf, half buried in the sand and rotting beneath the sun. She swallowed, took another deep breath, and tried not to think about the awful smell.

"I'm going to pass the pencil and a page from the pad to you now. I'm going to slide it under the door to you."

Avery made a wet, strangling sound, and she told him again not to try to talk, just write if he could, write the answers to her questions and anything else that he needed to say.

"Are you in pain? Is there any way I can help?" she asked, and in a moment the tip of the pencil began scritching loudly across the sheet of writing paper. "Not so hard, Avery. If the lead breaks, I'll have to try to find another."

He slid the piece of paper back to her, and it was damp and something dark and sticky was smudged across the bottom. She held it close to her face, never mind the smell so strong it made her gag,

made her want to vomit, so that she could read what he'd scrawled there. Nothing like Avery's careful hand, his tight, precise cursive she'd always admired and had tried to imitate, but sweeping, crooked letters, blocky print, and seeing that made her want to cry so badly that she almost forgot about the dead-whale-and-cabbages smell.

HURTSS ME MERY MORE THAN CAN NO
NO HELP NO HELLP ME

She laid down the sheet of paper and tore another from her pad, the pad she used for her afternoon lessons, spelling and arithmetic, and slid it beneath the door to Avery.

"Avery, you *knew* you couldn't bear the key. You knew it had to be me or mother, *didn't* you? That it had to be a woman?"

Again the scritching, and the paper came back to her even stickier than before.

HAD TO TRY MOTER WOULD NOT LISSEN SO
I HAD TOO TRIE

"Oh, Avery," Meredith said. "I'm sorry," speaking so quietly that she prayed he would not hear, and there were tears in her eyes, hot and bitter. A kind of anger and a kind of sorrow in her heart that she'd never known before, anger and sorrow blooming in her to be fused through some alchemy of the soul, and by that fusion be transformed into a pure and golden hate.

She tore another page from the pad and slipped it through the crack between the floor and the attic door.

"I need to know what to *do*, Avery. I'm reading the newspapers, but I don't understand it all. Everyone seems think war is coming soon, because of the assassination in Sarajevo, because of the Kaiser, but I don't *understand* it all."

It was a long time before the paper came back to her, smeared with slime and stinking of corruption, maybe five minutes of Avery's scritching and his silent pauses between the scritching. This time the page was covered from top to bottom with his clumsy scrawl.

TO LATE ~~IF~~ TO STOP WAR TOO LATE NOW
WAR IS COMING NOW CANT STP THAT MERRY
ALL SET IN MOTION NINTH WAVE REMEMBER?
BUT MERY YOU CAN DONT LISSEN TO FADER

YOU CAN HOLD ~~NINE~~ THEE LINE STILL TYME
YOU OR MOTHER KIN HOLD THEE LIN STILL
IT DOEZ NOT HALF TO BE THE LADST WAR

When she finished reading and then re-reading twice again everything Avery had written, Meredith lay the sheet of paper down on top of the other two and wiped her hand on the floor until it didn't feel quite so slimy anymore. By the yellow-white light of the candle, her hand shimmered as though she'd been carrying around one of the big banana slugs that lived in the forest. She quickly ripped another page from the writing pad and passed it under the door. This time she felt it snatched from her fingers, and the scritching began immediately. It came back to her only a few seconds later and the pencil with it, the tip ground away to nothing.

DUNT EVER COME BAK HERE AGIN MERRY
I LOVE YOU ALWAYTS AND WONT FERGET YOU
PROMISS ME YOU WILL KNOT COME BACK
HOLD THEE LINE HOLD THE LINE

"I can't promise you that, Avery," she replied, sobbing and leaning close to the door, despite the smell so strong that it had begun to burn her nose and the back of her throat. "You're my brother, and I can't ever promise you that."

Another violent thud against the door then, so hard that her father was sure to have heard, so sudden that it scared her, and Meredith jumped back and reached for the candlestick.

"I remember the ninth wave, Avery. I remember what you said — the ninth wave, greater than the last, all in flame. I *do* remember."

And because she thought that perhaps she heard footsteps from somewhere below, and because she couldn't stand to hear the frantic strangling sounds that Avery had begun making again, Meredith hastily gathered up the sticky, scribbled-on pages from the pad and then crept down the attic stairs and back to her bedroom. She fell asleep just before dawn and dreamt of flames among the breakers, an inferno crashing against the rocks.

8.
March 1915

"This is where it ends," Merry, her mother's ghost said. "But this is where it begins, as well. You need to understand that if you understand nothing else."

Meredith knew that this time she was not dreaming, no matter how much it might *feel* like a dream, this dazzling, tumbling nightmare wide-awake that began when she reached the foot of the rickety staircase leading her down into the deep place beneath the house. Following her mother's ghost, the dim glow of a spectre to be her Virgil, her Beatrice, her guiding lantern until the light from the pool was so bright it outshone Ellen Dandridge's flickering radiance. Meredith stood on the pier, holding her dead mother's barnacle- and algae-encrusted hand, and stared in fear and wonder towards the island in the pool.

"The infinite lines of causation," the ghost said. "What has brought you here. That is important as well."

"I'm here because my father is a fool," Meredith replied, unable to look away from the yellow-green light dancing across the stone, shining up from the depths beneath her bare feet.

"No, dear. He is only a man trying to do the work of gods. That never turns out well."

The black eye set deep into the flesh of Meredith's palm itched painfully and then rolled back to show its dead-white sclera. She knew exactly what it was seeing, because it always told her; she knew how close they were to the veil, how little time was left before the breach tore itself open once and for all.

"Try to forget your father, child. Concentrate on time and space, on the history that has brought you here. All the strands of the web."

Meredith squeezed the ghost's soft hand, and the dates and names and places spilled through her like the sea spilling across the shore, a flood of obvious and obscure connections, and she gritted her teeth and let them come.

On December 2, 1870, Bismark sends a letter to Wilhelm of Prussia urging him to become Kaiser. In 1874, all Jesuits are ordered to leave

Italy, and on January 8th, 1877, Crazy Horse is defeated by the U.S. cavalry at Wolf Mountain in Montana. In June 1881, Austria signs a secret treaty with the Serbs, establishing an economic and political protectorate, and Milan is crowned King of Serbia —

"It hurts," she whispered; her mother frowned and nodded her head as the light from the pool began to pulse and spin, casting counterclockwise glare and shadow across the towering rock walls.

"It will always hurt, dear. It will be pain beyond imagining. You cannot be lied to about that. You cannot be led to bear this weight in ignorance of the pain that comes with the key."

Meredith took another hesitant step towards the end of the short pier, and then another, and the light swelled angrily and spun hurricane fury about her.

"They are rising, Merry. They have teeth and claws sharp as steel and will devour you if you don't hurry. You must go to the island now. The breach is opening—"

"I am afraid, mother. I'm so sorry, but I *am* afraid."

"Then the fear will lead you where I can't. Make the fear your shield. Make the fear your lance."

Standing at the very end of the pier, Meredith didn't dare look down into the shining pool, kept her eyes on the tiny island only fifteen or twenty feet away.

"They took the boat when you crossed over," she said to her mother's ghost. "How am I supposed to reach the gate when they've taken the boat away?"

"You're a strong swimmer, child. Avery taught you to swim."

A sound like lightning, and *No*, she thought. *I can't do that. I can do anything except step off this pier into that water with them. I can stand the pain, but—*

"If you know another way, Merry, then take it. But there isn't much time left. The lines are converging."

Merry took a deep breath, gulping the cavern's dank and foetid air, hyperventilating, bracing for the breathless cold to come, all the things that her brother had taught her about swimming in the sea. Together they'd swum out past the breakers, to the kelp forest in the deep water farther offshore, the undulating submarine weald where

bat rays and harbor seals raced between the gigantic stalks of kelp, where she'd looked up and seen the lead-pale belly of an immense white shark passing silently overhead.

"Time, Merry. It is all in your hands now. See how you stand alone at the center of the web and the strands stretch away from you? See the intersections and interweaves?"

"I see them," she said. "I see them all," and she stepped off into the icy water.

October 30th, 1883, an Austro-German treaty with Roumania is signed, providing Roumania defence against the Russians. November 17th, 1885, the Serbs are defeated at the Battle of Slivnitza and then ultimately saved only by Austrian intervention. 1887, and the Mahdist War with Abyssinia begins. 1889, and a boy named Silas Desvernine sails up the Hudson River and first sees a mountain where a nameless being of moonlight and thunder is held inside a black stone. August 1889, and her father is led to the edge of the Pacific by a Miwok guide. August 27th, 1891, the Franco-Russian Entente—

The strands of the web, the ticking of a clock, the life and death of stars, each step towards Armageddon checked off in her aching head, and the water is liquid ice threatening to freeze her alive. Suddenly, the tiny island seemed miles and miles away.

1895 August, and Kaiser Wilhelm visits England for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. 1896, Charles E. Callwell of the British Army publishes Small Wars–Their Principles and Practice. February 4th, 1899, the year Aguinaldo leads a Philippine Insurrection against U.S. forces—

All of these events, all of these men and their actions. Lies and blood and betrayals, links in the chain leading, finally, to this moment, to that ninth wave, mightier than the last, all in flame, and Meredith swallowed a mouthful of sea water and struggled to keep her head above the surface.

"Hurry, child!" her mother's ghost shouted from the pier. "They are rising," and Meredith Dandridge began to pray then that she would fail, would surrender in another moment or two and let the deep have her. Imagined sinking down and down for all eternity, pressure to crush her flat and numb, to crush her so small that nothing and no one would ever have any need to harm her again.

Something sharp as steel swiped across her ankle, slicing her skin and her blood mingled with the sea.

And the next stroke drove her fingers into the mud and pebbles a the edge of the island, and she dragged herself quickly from the pool from the water and the mire, and looked back the way she'd come There were no demons in the water, and her mother's ghost wasn' watching from the pier. But her father was, Machen Dandridge an his terrible black book, his eyes upturned and arms outstretched to a indifferent Heaven; she cursed him for the last time and ignored th blood oozing from the ugly gash in her right foot.

"This is where I stand," she said, getting to her feet and turnin towards the small cave at the center of the island, her legs as wea and unsteady as a newborn foal's. "At the bottom gate, and I hold th key to the abyss."

The yellow-green light was almost blinding and soon the pool woul begin to boil.

"The ebony key to the first day and the last, the key to the momen when the stars wink out one by one and the sea heaves its rotting bell at the empty, sagging sky. The blazing key that even angels fear to keep.

For an instant, there was no cave, and no pool, and no cavern be neath a resentful, wicked house. Only the fire, pouring from the cav that was no longer there, to swallow her whole, only the voices of th void, and Meredith Dandridge made her fear a shield and a lance an held the line.

And in the days and weeks that followed, sometimes Machen Dan dridge came down the stairs to stand on the pier and gaze across th pool to the place where the thing that had been his daughter nestle in the shadows, in the hollows between the stones. And every da the sea gave her more of its armour, gilding her frail human skin wit the limey shells and stinging tentacles that other creatures had spen countless cycles of Creation refining from the rawest matter of life the needle teeth, the scales and poisonous barbs. Where his wife an son had failed, his daughter crouched triumphant as any martyr, an

sometimes, late at night, alone with the sound of the surf pounding against the edge of the continent, he sometimes thought of setting fire to the house and letting it burn down around him.

He read the newspapers.

He watched the stars for signs and portents.

When the moon was bright, the women still came to dance beside the sea, but he'd begun to believe they were only bad memories from some time before, and so he rarely paid them any heed.

When the weather was good, he climbed the hills behind the house and sat at the grave of his dead wife and whispered to her, telling her how proud he was of Meredith, reciting snatches of half-remembered poetry, telling her the world would come very close to the brink because of what he'd done, because of his blind pride, but, in the end, it would survive because of what their daughter had done and would do for ages yet.

On a long rainy afternoon in May, he opened the attic door and killed what he found there with an axe and his old Colt revolver. He buried it beside his wife, but left nothing to mark the grave.

He wrote long letters to men he'd once known in England and New York and Rio de Janeiro, but there were never any replies.

And time rolled on, neither malign nor beneficent, settling across the universe like the grey caul of dust settling thick upon the relics he'd brought back from India and Iran and the Sudan a quarter of a century before. The birth and death of stars, light reaching his aging eyes after a billion years racing across the vacuum, and sometimes he spent the days gathering fossils from the cliffs and arranging them in precise geometric patterns in the tall grass around the house. He left lines of salt and drew elaborate runes, the meanings of which he'd long since forgotten.

His daughter spoke to him only in his dreams, or hers, no way to ever be sure which was which, and her voice grew stronger and more terrible as the years rushed past. In the end, she was a maelstrom to swallow his withered soul, to rock him to sleep one last time, to show him the way across.

And the house by the sea, weathered and weary and insane, kept its secrets.

The Red Rite

Don Webb

MY DAD THOUGHT my college plans were great. I got a BA in Arabic. He said in his generation kids that majored in Russian got good jobs in the CIA. He worked as a warehouseman all his life. Made good money at the end. Had a nice home in Normal, Illinois. He understood when I went after a Masters. "Specialize! That's the way of the world!"

Dad was a good guy, he tried hard to reach me. I was the poster boy for Asperger's Syndrome. Nothing reached me, except for an obscure thrill late at night when working on an obscure text, or a problem in math, or seeing the eyes of certain women in the twilight. Then my soul would return to me. I had boyish dreams of being a scholar or scientist. Or of finding the right woman and sailing around the world. So I took Dad's advice as license for indulgence.

I specialized. In ninth century Arabic literature; my Masters thesis was on Ibn al-Nadim. Ibn al-Nadim, a Bagdad bookseller who had created a list of all known books in the Arabic language. He also catalogued all of the Syriac, Latin, Greek and Persian titles to be had in the Arabic world. For some reason this line of study did not attract the attention of the CIA, however it convinced my father that I was a hopeless idiot and he disowned me. My mother had drunk herself to death years ago, when I was in Junior High. I tried very hard to feel loss or anger or something. Frankly my feelings for dad and his for

me had largely been buried with Mom, as well as the certain knowledge that the other was responsible for her death. I did not have the ambition or the funds to pursue a doctorate and found myself in Los Angeles. My girlfriend Suzy Brown, a leggy brown-eyed blonde, was seeking the attention of Hollywood, and without other focus I drifted after her. She lived on the first floor and I the third of a white stucco apartment building that had (I believe) been rather fashionable in the 1950's. I got a part-time job at an organic grocery store and another part-time job doing pool maintenance for the complex. I met the oldest resident, the highly wrinkled Mary LaKwon, who had also sought the attention of Hollywood almost fifty years ago. Ms. LaKwon did Tarot readings by phone and received some sort of movie money from a dead second husband who specialized in gangster roles. Suzy was gone most days, pounding the pavement, getting the occasional extra role. I cleaned up the pool area before noon and took care of the cheese and meat cases until seven at night. Miss LaKwon liked to sit on a lawn chair with her Mac laptop and a Rider-Waite Tarot deck helping the hopeless, the horny, and the bored.

One day she asked me, "Mr. Hardy, did you tell me you read medieval Arabic?"

"Why, yes Ma'am. I do. Why do you ask?"

"There's an ad in Craigslist this morning for an Arabic scholar. It asks for a resume, links to translated works, if any. Pays top dollar."

The movie industry produces strange needs. I assumed that some director thought he needed a translation of the *1001 Nights*, which he could then ignore. But "top dollar" sounded interesting. After my shifts, I sent my resume and a letter of interest. I told Suzy and she mocked the whole thing.

"It will either be some weirdo that thinks he has an ancient magic book, for which he paid 'top dollar' on eBay, or a blocked writer thinking he can rework a classic."

I agreed.

My smartphone buzzed at 12:30 AM, about an hour after I had gone to sleep. I assumed it was Suzy. So I answered, "Hello, honey."

"Excuse me I am trying to reach Mr. Farren C. Hardy." It was a deep male voice with a trace of a Midwestern accent. At first I thought

it was my father's...calling after two years of silence, but of course he would not address me thusly.

"I am Farren C. Hardy."

"Please excuse the hour. I am something of a night owl."

"It's no problem; I was reading by the phone." Why do we do this?

"My name is Charles Ashton, I placed an ad in Craigslist for a reader of medieval Arabic. You were so kind as to respond. I am very interested in your background with Ibn al-Nadim. I am an antiques dealer, semi-retired, and I came across a nineteenth century copy of a book that seems to have evaded Nadim's catalogue. I read modern Arabic well enough to get the gist of a newspaper, but I am afraid this work has me baffled."

"What services would you like?'

"I am in need of two services. Firstly I would like the work translated—or at least sections thereof. It appears to be a rival of the *Ġāyat al-Hakīm*, mainly a treatise on astrological magic with some rather curious notes on cosmology. My second, and in some ways more pressing need, is to obtain an opinion on the authenticity of the text. The book itself was a creation of nineteenth century Cairo by a press owned by one Paulos Metamon. Metamon claims that he bought the original from an Ishmaelite of mysterious bearing, whom he said literally disappeared into thin air after pocketing Metamon's silver. The text, if genuine, would be at least a century older than the *Ġāyat,* which would shed light on the connection between the Greco-Egyptian culture and early Islam, and, even if a fake, would prove interesting because of Metamon's connections with Helena Blavatsky. "

I had no idea who Blavatsky was, but an earlier version of the *Picatrix* would create a small but interesting storm in scholarly circles, although I doubted my opinion on the matter would hold much weight.

"I see," I said. "What sort of deadlines might we be talking about?"

"Oh I would let you decide what might be needed. I would offer you three hundred dollars a day. In cash, if you don't mind. But I have a few requirements. Firstly, I would need you to work at my home. The book is potentially very valuable, and I would hate for others to acquire it. Naturally you would need to consult the UCLA libraries and I would put my chauffeur at your service. Likewise my kitchen staff

is top notch, and available twenty-four hours a day. I would like to discuss the work with you in the evenings, say between seven and ten each night. I am afraid that is a somewhat demanding schedule as it would tend to destroy one's social life."

"Well frankly Mr. Ashton, I am new to LA and have no social life except for dinners with my girlfriend."

"What about your family?"

"I am, for practical purposes, an orphan."

"But you are a young man. Do you see much of your girlfriend?"

Here was a sticking point. Suzy and I had grown less and less connected. When she came here, the movie business seemed an unassailable fairy castle. But the occasional extra role led to many roles, which were leading to speaking roles. She went to parties full of glitz and glamour. At first she brought me along, but of late less and less. She was being pulled into her dream, and I was being pulled into the smog. She had been one of the women whose eyes had suggested strange vistas and other worlds, but as she made herself more attractive to Hollywood, she grew less attractive to me.

"We're casual."

"I see. Well maybe I can drip a little Oriental mystery over you so that you can re-charm her. What do you say Mr. Hardy, ready to make an old fool part with some of his money?"

"I'll need to tell the management of my apartment complex. You see, I work for them."

"What complex?"

"The La Paloma."

"The owner happens to be an old friend of mine. I'll tell Charlie to hold your job for you."

We talked a bit more and arranged for a car to pick me up at dusk the next night.

Suzy was indeed impressed.

"It sounds so mysterious!" she squealed. She knew who Blavatsky was...a nineteenth century Russian noblewoman who traveled the globe meeting spiritualists and magicians from Tibet to Cairo to (of course) California. She was sort of the grandmother of the New Age. Some director, whose name I did not know but was VERY IMPORTANT

was into Blavatsky. My boss at the La Paloma treated me like a kir promised to keep my job open and offered me hazelnut-flavored c fee. My boss at Fresh Plus insulted me and told me to stick an orga cally grown leek into my anus.

A black Cadillac came at dusk.

Mr. Ashton's thirty room home in the Los Feliz neighborhood w the closest thing I'd seen to pure wealth. The driver took me to t library rich with rare books, oriental carpets covered the dark tile small Picasso adorned the wall, and my first thought was...$300 a d is chicken feed! Then Ashton walked in the room. He was tall, pa and dark, with an immaculate silver beard and very lively eyes t color of Brazilian amethyst. He wore a red smoking jacket, and us a cane with a yellow ivory handle. Despite my pretensions to cultu all I could think of was the guy in the Dos Equis ads, "the most i teresting man in the world." He smiled, shook my hand and we sat overstuffed leather chairs. I had never been overwhelmed by anyo in my life, but this was different. I couldn't remember what we spo of during our first interview. He raised my salary to $375 a day a paid for my first week. He showed me the book, he showed my offi with two computers (he didn't know whether I was a Mac perso so he supplied me with both). It was stocked with dictionaries a reference books. He had subscribed to a dozen research sources f me. There was a mini-fridge, and faxes, and buttons for calling do to the kitchen or the driver on call. The lights responded to verb command. He had a button in his rooms where he could call me. T fax machines (two of them!) gave me great joy. Ashton assumed th I would be comparing notes with learned humans around the worl He saw me as a scholar: this was a recognition I could never get fro Dad or Suzy.

He told me the rules of the house. I could not go to the east wir He had medical "conditions" and the area was a quasi-hospital. If was there he was not to be disturbed. If I wanted to sleep over, I h to tell the staff twenty-four hours in advance. If I was to have a gu sleep over, I needed to tell the staff forty-eight hours in advance had to leave my smart phone with the driver. I could not take pictu inside the home for any reason. If I wanted to send a fax or email

a page of the book to a scholar I had to ask for permission forty-eight hours in advance. He had put in a dedicated land line for me. I had to be patted down by the driver when I left the home. My notes had to remain onsite. We would dine every day at eight in the evening. I was to dress for dinner. If I wanted to invite a friend to dinner I had to ask forty-eight hours in advance. All of the house rules were given to me in a small leather book. If I wished to terminate my employment I could do so at any time, but I agreed not to disclose any aspect of the project or any details of Mr. Aston's personal life. I would be paid a week's additional wages at time of severance for my digression.

And then we dined. We did not talk about the job or the book. Ashton was a great storyteller. He had crossed the globe seeking art and antiques. His stories ranged from illegal tomb raiding in Egypt to gossip about the London art world. He had stories of a hard-scrabble youth, an amazing love affair, battle fought with rival dealers that bordered on Indiana Jones tales, and his philosophical musings. He was a connoisseur of wine, but not in the least snobbish—he taught me how to find wines I liked and how to ignore snobs. He loved mah-jongg like my mother's mother, and we would play with two Chinese cooks. He had a great and Catholic love of music—at one moment he would entertain me with a Big Band classic, the next with avant-garde electronica, then the Beatles. He shared my love of classic horror movies. Dinner with Mr. Ashton became the highlight of my day.

I almost lived in his home the first three weeks. After dinner I would share my translations with him. Despite his modesty, he was a keen student of Arabic. He would question my word choice; discuss the authenticity of certain expressions, even showing awareness of dialect. I often thought I was learning more from him than I was giving to him. I would work on my translations until one in the morning. Then he would join me for a little sherry. The late night conversations were free-ranging, from sexual practices around the world to Ashton's long-term concerns about pollution and energy use. I wondered if he was hitting on me at first. I had always been as straight a man as I know, but part of me almost seemed drawn to him in that way. On another level I began to think of him more and more as the father I wished I had had—cultured, well rounded, truly wise, and funny. I

had neglected Suzy entirely for the first three weeks of my stay. Indeed I thought of very little save for the intricacies of the translation and my growing "bromance" with Charles.

It was he who asked me how my girlfriend was doing.

I stammered a bit, admitting that I was lost in my work. Many mornings I did not bother to have the driver take me back to my crappy apartment.

"You must be careful, my friend. It is easy to let the lure of old things replace your orientation in the present world. Here in my house, one can live in a world of our own making. But this is my orbit, not your own. You are too young to be living in a world that reflects the will of another. Perhaps you should invite her to dinner."

I felt ashamed. I was also a little afraid at how much I craved this man's approval. This wasn't like me. I tried to find something about him to hate. He had a nervous tick. He stroked an amulet of "mutton fat" hide that depicted a stylized griffin. Many times when there was a gap in the conservation, his left hand found the bauble and he patted it while staring at me. His remarks had stung me, and up his hand went to stroke his charm. I tried to find something to say, but my brain felt full of his eyes, watching me, judging me.

He added, "Unless of course you think she would fall in love with me."

There was another awkward silence and he patted his talisman.

After dinner we went to the library and I shared my research, "Of course without a copy of the scroll Metamon claimed to have, there can be no certain dating. The language is pure eighth century, with signs of a Yemenite dialect. The author's Islam seems to be weak. He uses Shi'ite terminology when he speaks of the faith; for example, he refers to his family as *khassi* instead of Shi'ite. At first I thought he used *al-hashwiya* or "People of the Revelation" for Islamics, which is the Shi'iite convention as opposed to Abl al-sunna, 'Folk of the Tradition.' But it seems that the revelation he refers to is not that of Mohamed, but some pre-deluge prophet. That points to a Saebean group or some other sect like the Yezidis. I am betting on Sabaeans."

"Because of the planetary and stellar focus," said Ashton.

"Exactly. He claims that Iblis is not Shaitan, but a sort of outer

space daemon that crystallizes the soul of his followers. He uses the Egyptian word *akh* for soul, which refers to a star demon. Most texts like this follow the Greek concept of identifying with the Sun by a series of trance journeys. The series here is in a different order... Moon, Venus, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and finally the Big Dipper. His idea seems to be that rather than submitting to divine will, one becomes a star by a series of ordeals."

"What does he say about Saturn?"

"Saturn is interesting; he uses the name Cykranosh, for which I can find no other attestation, although he specifically identifies it with other with the Egyptian Seb, the Coptic Repa, Kaiwan, the Hebrew Chiun, the Greek Cronos, and Saturn of the Romans. Saturn represents a decision point. The magician needs to have conquered five obstacles. He or, as the author stresses again and again, *she* must conquer the changeability of the moon by having a firm will despite life's up and downs. Then he must not be ensnared by loving an inferior person. Then Mercury will try to make him addicted to magic... he warns, Bring your life to magic, not magic to your life!' Mars challenges him with the desire to go on endless jihads...anything from petty revenge to social justice. The magician must spend time here and then retreat to a place of his own making, where he surrounds himself with books, servants and wine. I told you his Islam seemed a little weak. Then he must take up the challenge of Cykranosh. He can either choose to leave this cycle of lives and sail beyond Saturn or make sure to make a place for his next incarnation."

"That doesn't sound Islamic at all," said Ashton.

"There are heretical sects of Islam like the Druze, who believe reincarnation within a bloodline is possible. Since they are derived from Shi'ite teachings, I suspect our unnamed author may have been a forerunner of their thought, although of a magical and heretical sect."

"How does the magician know if he is ready to leave the solar system?"

"Pleasure...if he finds more pleasure conversing with star daemons, he is ready. If he prefers his wine, books and sex, he may choose to remain on Earth for a longer period of time. The writer claims there are four pillars that hold up the universe: Desire—which following

Plato can be both sexual desire and the desire for knowledge—Power, Sacrifice, and Evolution. 'Desire' and 'Power' would seem to belong to Shaitan/Iblis at least in my mind. 'Sacrifice' involves service to the Revelation...the magician must pass on his personal Hadith to others; the secret tradition must not die."

"And Evolution?" asked Ashton.

"The author asserts that life on earth has evolved from the primeval slime of Ubbo-Sahlah. This is an unconscious evolution worked upon the earth by the star daemons. The magician must undertake a second conscious evolution to grow like his daemonic forbearers. The three other pillars and the six planets are the nine gates of evolution."

"How does he stay on Earth?"

"There are references to the Red Rite, which involves sex, blood and wine —The general theory is that the magician makes a space for himself in the desires of others, then sends his soul into that space while his blood bleeds out and they are 'reddened' by sex and wine and a sense of transgression. The red of their souls becomes a spiritual placenta, their copulation cannot help but bring about a home for his soul—if his will has been strong enough and their sense of wrongness is great enough. The writer says that wizards have taught humans to feel sinful to gather their essence for their own works."

As usual Ashton typed on an old laptop while I spoke. He asked some questions about my progress, books I had consulted and so forth. Then in the wee hours of the morning he told me tales of discovering a rare Persian carpet being used by a Hollywood film company and his stealing it from the set while leaving a rug with similar design from Woolworth's in its place. His mimicking of the fat security guard was hilarious. I forgave him of my bad feelings, and headed off for bed.

In the night I woke wanting a snack and slipped out for the kitchen wearing only the silk pajamas that had been laid for me by the staff. In my attempts at clumsy stealth, I actually knocked into Mr. Ashton who was wandering down an unlit hall. I felt his erection brush against me. This turned me on so much that as soon as I apologized I went back to my room and feverishly jacked off. I felt terrible remorse and emptiness when I was done—and a strong dose of homophobia

as well. The next morning I realized that I had probably come in contact with the ivory head of his cane instead of his penis. I felt even more embarrassed. I told the staff that I was ill and needed to go to my own apartment. The driver asked if I needed to go to the doctor or have him pick up any over the counter medicines for me. I said no, but even so a care packet of juices, teas and fruit arrived in the afternoon.

I did feel weak and feverish that night. I had a moment of sobering revelation—I had lived at Ashton's home for nearly three weeks. I hadn't spoken with my friends, wasted time on Facebook, exercised, watched TV or talked with Suzy. How had the time gone by? I called Suzy up and left her a less than coherent message of needing to see her. I passed out about midnight and had several hours of nightmares. At first I was translating the book, but it kept getting bigger. Pages would unfold and unfold until it filled up the room. Soon I was in a labyrinth of paper, running from something. At first it was a shuffling zombie a la George Romero, but clearly of Mr. Ashton. Then he changed into a brass Minotaur. Lastly he became a sort of toad-god with stubby bat wings that hopped down the papers of Arabic verse and caught me by opening his big mouth and flicking me with an enormous purple-pink tongue.

When I woke my sheets were soaked with sweat and were icy cold. My limbs ached. I had only felt this bad once before, after three weeks of the flu my senior year in high school. I checked the clock by my bed. I had only slept five hours. I was hungry and nauseous, nervous and exhausted. I peeled the nasty sheets off and showered. Boy I missed the fancy bergamot shampoo that Mr. Ashton had provided. Head and Shoulders just didn't quite cut it.

Then I checked my e-mail.

I had not slept five hours.

I had slept twenty nine hours!

Suzy had left three messages. In the first she thanked for the invitation she had received to dine at Mr. Ashton's home. In the second she asked about what she should wear, and expressed concern about our relationship since I had not spoken with her in so long. In the third she called me a 'jerk' and an 'ass-wipe' for not returning her calls. Just

because I worked for a rich man, I shouldn't be going "all Hollywood" on her. I called her back ten times expressing my apology, telling her that I had been badly sick and telling her not to go to Mr. Ashton' because I was sure that was where my sickness had come from.

At least the last message was true.

Of course she didn't call me back.

My emotions told me that I was waking up from a mad, bad, drunken binge. My reason told me that I had some sort of breakdown based on rich food, a bizarre sleep schedule and a massive/obsessive research project—give me a couple of normal days and my paranoia would disappear. My guts told me that an alpha male was about to steal my mate. I should pound my chest and attack.

My guts won; I was after all twenty-six.

I knew the earliest Ashton ever ate was eight. If Suzy were going I need only arrive at 7:45 and—and—and I wasn't really sure what would do. Beating up an old man didn't seem too heroic. Although as weak as I felt, it might have been an equal match. I started to call the driver, and then was shocked at my dependence toward Ashton. thought I had considered him a father figure, something I knew I was in sore need of. But I realized he was mother and father. He catered to my every need—even cool PJs to sleep in. I drove my old clunker to his home. I did not go to the front door, I didn't want to be let in by the staff. I wanted surprise. I went in by the pool and made my way to the library.

Ashton wasn't there. But his laptop was. On and open.

It showed a translation of the text he had hired me to translate.

Except it wasn't my translation.

It was a full version of the text. A much better translation than I had done. Difficult phrases rendered well, nice notes. He hadn' needed me for this.

I ran through the house. I would find him. I broke into the dining room. He was sitting next to Suzy, his hands inside her orange silk blouse, caressing her breasts. Their lips locked in a kiss. I made some involuntary noise. She gasped, he pulled his hands back. I could see her erect nipples.

Suzy said, "You said he wasn't coming."

Ashton said, "I said he was not invited. Mr. Hardy, please don't make a scene. You are not wanted here."

I advanced. I balled my hands into fists, and then I felt the cool breeze of his air conditioning. I shivered. I felt foolish. I remembered the last time I had fought was a minor tussle with a cousin back in high school. He had argued that University High had a better team than West Normal. He had beaten my ass. My dad was so disappointed in me. "You can't even fight, you pansy. What the hell good are you?" The Asperger's and the bad fighting skills only meant one thing to Dad's generation, and it was the worst thing he could think of.

Suzy was covering herself. I saw the wine, which by now I recognized as a rare vintage—probably close to a thousand a bottle. I stood there shaking for a few seconds and then retreated. What would I do? Beat a man several decades older than me? Claim rights on a woman that I had ignored for weeks because I had preferred to pursue this weird daddy-love with this man? It was all Springer Show material, a big bad bag of Freudian evil.

I went home. My apartment manager knocked on my door the next morning and I was pool boy again. Mrs. LaKwon had died during my absence. (I wonder if her cards had warned her...what cards would have warned me? The Devil? The Hermit?) The grocery store didn't hire me back, but a used book store did. Suzy didn't return my calls. I went up to her apartment once. She wasn't home. Her car wasn't parked in the apartment complex. I planned to move away at the end of the month. I would drive my old car back to Normal. Make up with dad, or if not, work there. The month came and I didn't leave. And another month. I had dreams. I had dreams of Ashton and Suzy in bed. Or I would have dreams that I was Ashton and I was screwing Suzy. And I had a couple of dreams that I was Suzy being fucked by Ashton. I awoke aroused and also feeling very dirty. I drove by his house maybe twenty times. I planned emotional scenes where I took her back.

Or where I begged to be his aide again. Big bad fucking Freud.

I began to put together his life from the many stories he told me. Born to a wealthy California family he got to see his father screw it all and lose everything by the time he was 16. Ashton put himself

through Stanford, by "will alone" he had said. *Moon.* Right out of school he fell in with an esoteric group...the kind that flourishes in California. He played at being a magician, until he realized the men involved lacked real money, real jobs or steady girlfriends. He did a money ritual and went to Vegas where he had enough winning to buy an airplane ticket to Europe. *Mercury.* Then he had gone to Paris and chased tail for years, before finding the right woman, who had initiated him into the antique trade—and he had hinted something more mysterious—something perhaps more dangerous to the soul in the form of an international brotherhood (all very Dan Brown) , whose contacts gave him a huge advantage as a trader. *Venus.* But she had died and there had been no children. He was bitter for years, traveling the world, fighting off rivals in the trade. He had even dueled twice, once in Sitka, Alaska over some rare Russian hand painted tarots, once in Ponape over Neolithic idols. He saw that he was beginning to like violence too much. *Mars.* He had retreated to California, buying a home where his mother had had to work as a maid in the last half of her life. He invested well, traded well, and cornered a little piece of the world where he was king. *Jupiter.* Then in his old age he studied esoteric texts. He made sure that I read the text with the real Secrets. *Saturn/ Cykranosh.* I couldn't forget the Book.

I really tried to leave the third month. I quit my jobs, packed my car and headed out of town. My car overheated. It had blown a gasket, and I had it towed back to the apartment. The manger was very happy to have me back; I called home. Maybe Dad would send me some escape money. After a few calls to such numbers as I remembered I got my younger aunt. Dad had died about six months ago. No one knew how to contact me. He had written me out of his will...that hadn't been an idle threat, but anyway his medical expenses had devoured the estate. There was some stuff of my Mom's in a couple of boxes. Did I want her to ship them to me?

I hung up. I didn't know what I wanted. I was depressed, aimless, slept 12 hours a day.

Then one day as I skimmed palm fronds from the pool...it hit me. I had something different than 99.999% of humanity. I had a plan. I had a model for power—both worldly power and other worldly tran-

scendence. It had three pillars: Desire—you have to want things. Power—you have to rule yourself and others. Sacrifice—you have to give up distractions like magic, war and sex when they've taught you enough. I sat down on a chaise lounge. I realized that by translating the spells in the book I had memorized them. I knew what to do, what to say at each life shift. I could have a life just like the one I had tasted. I wasn't Adam thrown from the garden. Ashton had taught me a deep lesson. I began looking for a better job than my bookstore, and I began typing feverishly at night remembering the grimoire's words. I felt better than I ever had.

Late one night my phone buzzed.

It was Suzy and she was terrified and guilty and even a little incoherent. Ashton had been taken to the hospital. She apologized for calling me, but she said she knew no one in LA anymore. She had spent every day with Ashton. But now as he lay dying, she suddenly felt alone, confused. Why had she given up her dream of the movies? Why had she been so taken with the old man? I knew how she felt and I drove to Ashton's home. The butler let me in. Suzy was crying in the library. While I comforted her, the staff left—one by one. I never saw them again. I saw they had luggage, but my interests were with Suzy. She was shaking and wet with tears as I held her. The kitchen staff left fruit, wine and cheese on a platter. I held her. We had wine and cheese, and apples and pecans, and finally figs and forgiveness. Then more wine.

And then we had bed.

She told me that she had never slept with Ashton, but she cried out his name.

More embarrassingly so did I. And *mirabile dictu* at the rather crucial time.

His lawyer knocked on the door of what had been my bedroom at 9:15. He opened the door after a gentle rapping and seemed unfazed by our lack of dress. Maybe he talks to naked people in dead men's houses all the time. Of course at that rather embarrassed moment we did not know that Mr. Ashton had died. He had apparently bled out about midnight, perhaps at the moment of our shameful outcries. He had remembered us in his will, but we had to leave the property. Im-

mediately. (Actually I think he said in the hour.)

We would be contacted.

I took Suzy back to my apartment. I put out ads on Craigslist ar other places as a translator. In a couple of days, Suzy was talking her agent and got some real work in commercials. In two months, v were making it—barely—but making it. Then we found out Suzy w with child. We were excited. We were ready.

Then the estate contacted us. Of course we had fantasized that v would be left millions. What we got were two nice cars and slight less than a hundred thousand dollars. Later a box of stuff came; put it next to my Mom's stuff and let it sit there awhile. We nev discussed Ashton. I had begun to tell Suzy about the grimoire. Sl was dubious, but didn't mind if I tried a spell or two. When we g around to opening the box, we found it contained Ashton's amule the copy of the book I had used for my translation, some porcela statues Suzy had really liked, and a note:

Dear Ones,

Sometimes you have to accelerate things; I am sorry that I was abru You have my love for making me realize that I was not done with th marvelous globe.

Charles Asht

There was also a bankbook that revealed we would be heirs to fo million dollars in ten years.

I hung his amulet on a nail in the bedroom. High enough to be o of our son's way when he came along.

I wasn't surprised when young Charles Ashton Hardy took it off tl wall and started wearing it when he was five. It only weirds me o sometimes when he looks at Suzy and me with such a *knowing* look

(IN MEMORY OF CAS)

Upon the Fetish Rod to Otherwise

Lee Morgan

ANN WALKED AT night, unacknowledged, unmolested. Her thoughts were bigger than she was, they flashed out from her with manic intensity against the brooding sky. The work she had planned for this night required her to be alone. For many years Ann had been far too afraid of her thoughts to be alone with them; they felt like the keen hunger of a beast covering her trail and she had tried to outrun them. There had always been that unwordable fear that it was not really her voice she was hearing. But these days she'd stopped running, her rhythmic step made an easy accompaniment to the words that whirled through her mind.

Here where the ghost tracks kiss each other and the toads swarm on witches' graves we don't talk about human things if we can help it. We don't prattle or gossip or make noise but speak like the wind in the dead trees hissing, with the language of eyeless things. Nobody wakes us from our open-eyed dream. No one ventures to put their hands on our shoulders and turn us, when they meet us, hood raised, standing still, on a night time track...No, the goodwives who would cut me above the breath to let the red mystery of my virtue flow like thick swamp water do not dare to trouble the crossroads walker at this hour.

Thus were the words that spun forth from her like an endless thread of dark poetry.

The Cornish badlands and all Her corrigans were thought to dog

Ann's wandering heel. People would sweep her footprints away ou of the dust outside their home lest the shape of a horse's hoof re veal itself in the place of her track and ill fortune follow. To such a them, it was as if she were the moors walking and all feared they'd b pulled away in into the green stained thistledown of her gown. There were magics hidden there in her skirts it was told. Sorcerous spindle spinning that wound the threads for the stories that would be on the townsfolk's mouth by morning.

The goodwives who would have cut her to let the mist of the blood if they met her by day, would still come to her door at the ingather ing of the light. They came to beg the goodwill of the fayries, called them honeyed names, trembled and implored them for this or that. Sometimes they would credit Ann as a holy healer, at other times they'd said witch. It didn't matter what they said about Ann Jefferies anymore. Not to her. She was but the hollowed menhir that the gale roared and whistled tunes through. Alone on the moors she was as nameless as her Art and she liked it that way.

The wind had worn her soul smooth and her clothes ragged. She laughed as she remembered.

"Oh I was not a witch, no I was not, not until they locked me away with nothing but the fayrie food. Oh yes," she muttered aloud as she walked.

In the darkness and the confinement she had wrestled and loved with, fought and worshipped Him. The one who came to mean devi and savior both...When she went looking for him again as she did this night her steps were a meditation, a rosary, always she whispered un der her breath the same rune. "Moon shines bright, waters run clear I am here, but where's my fayrie dear? Moon shines bright, waters run clear, I am here, but where's my fayrie dear?"

The mystery of where she was headed was as deep as the night's stillness. In a way it was more important what she was heading away from, than towards. She was heading away from the story of this woman that people called Ann Jefferies, she who ate the fayrie food The story was at her back, slavering at her heels, a hungry narrative revenant that swallowed whole realities. She had become more than the girl who didn't need to eat, the layer-on of hands, she had be

come *herself,* as few ever do, and thus birthed a tale. Her freedom, that of the unique one who is always becoming herself, still had to be searched for in the afterbirth, slippery and raw.

No longer did she check each foxglove bell for the mystery, looking under ferns for signs of it. Up near the stones, after the fayries had pricked your eye, you didn't need to look so hard anymore. The lecherous mist clung fast and thick with life, tainting you with alien hands and eyes, calling out the glimmer in the veins. The fayrie blood... Marking you Otherwise to the flock, like Cain. For sure it could be said that Ann danced to a music that no one else could hear. But it was a dirge tune when you listened close, drawing you to the bloodless state where the pitch of things is higher and stranger. When she said 'moon shines, bright water runs clear' it could have sounded like a playful ditty in the mouth of a blithe summer girl. But on Ann it was tweaked with the empty edge of fayrie speech. Her voice was flat, lacking emotional timbre. Her refrain was unwholesome to the mundane ear.

When she reached the stones on this night they had already reached her first. Their song was harsh-clear and bright till it made your eyes hurt. Hidden monstrous eyes opened in Ann's hands as she closed her daylight sight and opened the touch seeing...Or so it felt to her. *Blessed St Lucy, protect all those whose eyes turn Otherwise.*

In this way she would find the threads of vibration, the subtle pathways of interconnectivity with the numinous. She knew how to send her mind out along those lines with arachnid sensitivity. No longer was she a woman but a fungal network in the leaf loam, drifting pollen spores, and darting light. In this manner she found the right places to pour the skimmed cream of the milk haul. Amid the wordless fayrie chattering, in the hum-of-the-stars-but-no-words-way, she gasped. As the first rich white splatter of it wetted the stone, drenched the hungry threads as they vibrated, sunk low and was supped on by things with minds like diamonds, she trembled with joy. It was a sympathetic note on a viola, that indrawn breath of mingled passion and satisfaction. So deeply did Ann have the land up inside her, and so deeply did her white-shadow cavort with the bloodless ones. A gift to them became a gift to herself. She was fed in feeding them. The girl who did

not need to eat, whose back had all but turned hollow like an old tre with her long abstinences.

Ann sat down, her back to the stone. The humming in her marro fell quickly into tune with it. Moving slowly, never doing anythin to startle the gossamer-fine connection with things, she took out he wooden knitting needles and yarn. People thought it was just eccen tric, some of the places she sat down to knit or spin. But Ann woul weave her workings in wool, with needles made from the wood o a fayrie thorn. Each needle was engraved with branded marks, th meaning of which was known only to Ann and those who gave them the wood rubbed with the purple blood of elderberries. She had mad them soon after the first time They came for her while she was knit ting in the master's arbour. Soon the needles and the repetitive clink clink of them, loud in the gathering mind-storm of trance, had be come her doorway in, her charmed fetish that wooed the doors apar The very wood of the needles marked with the finger sweat of her lus for the Otherwise.

These days they weren't just a trick but a tool, and the wool sh knitted was uncannily spun at the backwards hour. The items she knit ted with it...They had been known to heal or blight, sometimes the were left hanging on boundary fences or wells. Sometimes during th process of sitting out, of taking the good neighbours their portion and the endless clack-clack of the hawthorn needles, They woul come. It would start like a white needle in the brain.

Only a few rows passed before it began, the coming of He wh had first stained her gown green with fayrie fingers. That's what th wooden needles were really for...When the excitement would star building, when the hairs would stand up and she'd start to shake a over, then she would need to focus on the simple repetitive task, giv her mind over to it, so that she wasn't swept away by the lily ric dread. The awe, and want of him...

First she heard their merry laughter shrill, creeping up the heat and coiling around the hill. It came with the sound of somethin creaking like a gate on an old hinge. Ann knew better than to try t look behind her. For many years now she had refused to answer ques tions about the fayrie people. Most thought she was afraid of bein

taken back to Bodmin Gaol, but the truth was more arcane. You were to neither look at them until they were ready for you, look back after leaving them, speak to them in human words, or speak of them in the village by day. They had nearly left her once before for telling her story and Ann would never make that mistake again. Only the tiny, sensitive hairs on the nape of her neck moved to stand, and the knitting needles kept time with her pulse.

The deep things were stirring tonight. The faces in the roots and the echoes in the stone...You could sense that old dark magic like a pall in the air that smelled of history. It smelled of glacial smashed tundras, of big game retreating before the march of the spreading green. It tasted like dust, old brine and loss, that land which had never yet known the tether of fences or felt the tyranny of a wall. She saw him lurking, close by, the magician spirit of those days. Bucka Dhu...No matter how many times he flashed atavistic across your consciousness it was always a shock when he came, a moment of unsteady panic like lightning in the veins.

Dark he was as the 'dhu' in his name suggests, and shaggy like the men of those old, cold times of spears and blood in the snow. Only the part animal legs and hips, with the mournful human eyes gave away his complexity. It was his eyes always that struck Ann and held her for a moment, with their deep primal humanity, their sadness and their dirt wisdom. You knew when he regarded you that he understood the land under their feet better than you would ever live long enough to understand anything. Then he was gone, just a wild man spectre on the edge of worlds, straddling them, watching history's clouds go hurrying by him...

There was the sound again.

Well she knew that what she was hearing was neither rusty gate nor laughter. Right before the Others would show themselves the humming would slow down until it had the same speed and jerky quality as broken, sharp, human laughter. The sound when slowed down even more, right before They exploded into our world, would sound just like a creaky hinge. Distortion was in the air then, objects seemed closer or further away in waves and nothing was right or natural anymore.

How could you explain to anyone how monstrous it was? Someone once had asked Ann if the little people were not terribly cute being so small? Ann had stared dumbly at her, no doubt some thought her simple witted at such moments of incomprehension. No, when you knew what they truly were seeing them small felt like the visual wrongness at the onset of migraine. They were discomforting in the way that bugs are, the sense that they could get onto you, under your skin...

The little green-clad man crawled up onto her shoulder and began to creep up the back of her neck like the wind they say blows over the feet of the corpses in the churchyard. The kind that makes you shiver. She shuddered like anyone would, yet she was not as they were, so she wanted this to happen. His feet felt like spiders. The imp kissed her neck and his tiny lips had no blood or warmth in them. His pallor was like the inside of an oyster. She felt him on her face only for a moment before he pricked her eye. The fit of illumination came on like dropping through space. For a moment everything was white silence reduced to a pinprick.

Where she was now was between nowhere and everywhere. A place known only to saints, poets, and madmen. Ann was certainly no poet, but she had been called both mad and a saint by some. Before visions came before her with the heat and vividness of a backdraft, she felt a surge of sensual yearning.

It was impossible for her to describe what her body was doing. She knew it did not come with her when she entered the Otherwise. Too many eyewitnesses had seen it lie twitching on the floor in a fit, her knitting splayed across the floor. The faeries told her that what the humans saw lying there it was but a 'stock' they left in her place to appease those who half-see.

"I am human!" she had wailed in the past, when they'd taken her. But it hadn't taken too long of how they laughed at this notion for her to understand that she had become one of them. That their condition was a green contagion that spread out upon the world through the tasting of enchanted apples and cauldron brews. And sometimes the Otherwise reached into cradles and tinkered.

No, her body was part of this enchantment, it always had been. But neither was her body back at the menhir nor was it walking into

Fayrie. It all seemed perfectly clear yet inexplicable at the same time. She felt like some kind of exotic plant that had its feeling roots in a human body and its aerial parts in the fayrie world. The opening of the eye of fire, that people called her fits, was just like waking up.It terrified her for a moment, every time, the realization that she'd been partly asleep since the last time she came here, walking in the world of man like an automaton. For a moment it wasn't this world that was terrifying but the partial somnambulism of the human world above. Was it above? Was she now below? Or perhaps, within things?

"People will come seeking your story," he said, in the way the fayrie man always spoke, using the witch-tongue with no words at all. "You must deny it them."

As always he was the size of a normal mortal man now, dressed in green, wearing a hat with a falcon's feather. His face was extraordinarily handsome at first glance. But it was much like the bells on the halter of his people's bridles, that rang so prettily and musically but when you looked closely were just slightly out of time with their motion. It made you sick if you paid attention to the discrepancy for too long. Somehow his eyes were like that...But the wrongness of them was far more difficult to describe. What would really frighten her was the times when she stayed in Fayrie so long Their eyes didn't look strange to her anymore...

Even though she loved him with a devotion she'd never offered a mortal man, Ann felt it healthy that he still chilled her. His eyes that seemed to stare at something hundreds of miles behind her never ceased to remind her of her own transience.

"I would never dream of speaking of you again. Some things...cannot be spoken of in the village by day," she whispered. *Not only should they not be, they cannot be.*

He appeared behind her then. She was used to him moving like that, to the fact that this world didn't work the same, that the dragon of space seemed to bend in on itself and swallow its own tail here. Well she knew this dance. This ultimate yielding of her substance, even her form, her name, her very ideas about herself, peeling her skin away. He unknotted her consciousness, and unbuttoned all the firmness that you need to hold your soul together. Unlacing and un-

dressing all those knots that help us to hold tight to life, yet must come unlashed like a gasp of abandon, if the sorcerer is to be conceived in our ashes.

"First you must burn," his voice whispered from all around her, suddenly dissolving into the shrill buzzing of a thousand insects going around and around her head.

"I'm afraid!"

"I know."

His voice was never so toneless, yet she clung to him like a child. She had heard the terrible stories of witch burnings in Scotland. Ann Jefferies, the little girl who had not been afraid of anything, and was bolder than all the boys, had not been afraid when they locked her into Bodmin Gaol without food. Her trust was a terrible thing. She had felt like a creature of light and air in those days. You can't cut a sunbeam. You can't injure a breeze. *They always reform, as do I, like water or mist. And so shall I.* And yet flame...The absolute single pointed intensity of emollition. Simultaneously the most horrific and the most fascinating act, for in it contains the very extreme end of all sensation. *There is nothing beyond burning except a vanishing point.*

"Only that which is already made of flame cannot burn."

His words seemed to enter the back of her neck through the base of her skull. They entered like a creature, like a crawling bloodied beast that came from the ochre blessed caves of the ancients. Like Bucka Dhu they carried a dark completion within themselves. She didn't need to respond to him or his subterranean voice that found secret channels in her. Ann's hunger sought the honey he had hidden under his tongue and her hands his deep mystery. With her love she would conjure forth the dragon he kept hidden in his chest cavity. She would invoke the wind to whistle through the rotted tree of his hollow back. She would crawl inside the empty tree of him and with destruction plant the seeds of herself.

"I'm not afraid anymore."

He smiled for the first time then. It was eerie and strange and yet somehow beatic. No one who didn't understand the love of beautiful strangeness could have countenanced her love for this being. He opened his chest skin the way a mortal man might open a garment.

And below was fire. Below and radiating out to the sound of her shuddering indrawn breath, was light that had a *sound* and a *smell,* and darkness that had hands and tongues.

As she stepped forward towards him her movements were slow and meditative. Desire had drawn its own sinuous power into a rose scented loop that drew eternity around on itself in slow revolutions. There was no need for haste or human fumbling and imperfection. Every motion was a deeply conscious and mindful art form.

Slowly she teased, through exquisite torments, the red flush of desire up into his cheeks. Some of her humanity leaked out into him in those moments and it became her job to hold the glamour of crystalline stillness. They were slowly revolving within a many faceted jewel of their own creation. A unique universe, a new mound of Fayrie, a crystal palace, of their own making...There was a fullness, they were in The Fullness, it was moving in her as he did. Or was it neither of them but the love that danced them in motion that gave birth to this star?

She realized she had not truly known what surrender was until that moment. Yet it was not a yielding of her essence before anybody, not before him or before God Himself. It was instead a shooting into brilliant being, a raining down of light, a terrifying and exhilarating expansion into ultimate being. There was no longer she and he. They were as a light-crowned Bucka...Mortal and immortal, beast and fayrie, red and green, dark and light, one and yet separate, always and never...The paradox at the centre of their heart thundering, breath starved communion was terrifying and beautiful. Holding his contradictions within her and bringing their ends together in a loop was a paroxysm of rapture.

Back at the stone, dew was forming on Ann's hair and her wan lips smiled.

She never looked back after she got up to leave the menhirs. It was very bad luck to look back at the place where It happened.

"Go safely my dear Ann," the fayrie man whispered from behind her. "Don't look around. There have been women such as you taken and hanged for witchery in other towns and I cannot risk that befalling you. There will come a time, many years into the future when your

story will become important again. When you will be know as saint and holy woman to those of The Persuasion. But for now we hide. For now we go below the stones. We remain to whisper in the cracks in the wall, in the hollows of trees and as the wind on the back of their necks. Like the ivy, slowly taking apart the masonry..."

It was a strange walk back along the way she'd come. Denied other tools her needles had become her fetish sticks, her mount she rode to Otherwise to meet the fayrie men. She had carved them with runes and made them sharp like her awareness was made sharp by the cunning incision of fire that moved from the brain of her fayrie man and into her.

Her wool held the knotted memories of her encounters with the Otherwise, and her stitches were left to rot on the thorn bush. Each stitch was a knot magic prayer. Over time the wool joined the wind and the rain and her dreams entered the ground and the trees. All her feral, untellable stories, migrating in miniature, the same size as the fayries when they first came, small enough to get under your skin...

She was the moors walking, her dreams great against the oppressive skies of the Bad Lands. The stones dreamed on in the arms of the mist. And the fayries seemed to move further into the heart of the apple, further to the west, retreating always like a vanishing star, across the edges of twilight and haunting the gloaming states of man's heart. The fayrie people left a sweet, sad taste in the air, and they left Ann the promise of a memory in the heart of her people.

But she did not want to be remembered as the girl that didn't need to eat, the girl who healed the master's wife of elf shot and ate only the bread of Fayrie for months. Not in connection with miracles that had felt commonplace and natural as they rippled out through her. Ann wanted to be remembered as the bold one but who had cried: oh god can't you feel it coming! When the fayries came. Who had been ravished by the Otherwise and let all the other knots that must be kept tied, and fastenings that must be tight-buttoned, fall open around her on the floor, and who hadn't minded her modesty one bit. It was the places where her life had been caressed into dishevelment by the Mystery that she took a thick, red human pride in.

The words that the wind had sung, echoing in the bone cave inside

her head, passing themselves off as thoughts, came back around on her again. It seemed that the spirit of the place was re-singing itself while the villagers slept, and Ann just happened to be the one there to hear it.

Here where the ghost tracks kiss each other and the toads swarm on witches' graves we don't talk about human things if we can help it. We don't prattle or gossip or make noise but speak like the wind in the dead trees hissing, with the language of eyeless things. Nobody wakes us from our open-eyed dream.

Verger

Daniel A. Schulke

THROUGHOUT MY PASSAGE by night, a suspicion harried me to the point of obsession, haunting the margins of proprioception. I surmised that, in my wandering, I was deceived by those spirits known to haunt forlorn places, marked by their hatred of humanity, and as a result I had strayed far from the proper course. Indeed, the waymarks of the path had grown few and scattered, and by all outward signs, I had lost my way. Dark lines of distant hedges floated beneath the stars, suggesting gateways to further fields, but none drew nearer despite the ongoing progress of my step.

Pausing to refresh myself, I unrolled the Red Warrant, the scroll of undetermined antiquity whose worn vellum preserved a description and map of the place where the First Murderer founded his kingdom. The bleak starlight offered scant illumination of its features, but its presence and resinous aroma served as odd reassurance as the night air grew colder. The features of this map, marked out in ciphers of rust and black, produced an odd visual resonance with the land, whose forms were dominated by ochre and iron pigments, and long-perished trees. As far as my investigation had ascertained, these remote byways had not been trodden by any in living memory, perhaps since the creation of the Warrant itself. As I scrutinized its writing, the map offered little guidance for the way ahead. From the wasted foothills of Mount Sabalan, the dendritic spidering of the cartographer's hand

indicated an extreme fragmentation of the way, with scores of potential descents to the alkali desert below.

In the scriptures it is said that at the end of his wanderings, Cain founded a city. Inhabited by colossal idols of stone, it was heavily fortified against those enraged multitudes who sought revenge for the murder of his brother Abel. Later, long after this city was destroyed, its precise location was forgotten, but its power lingered on in the minds of those who held its maker holy.

Within our abbey, the worth of the Red Warrant had been debated for years, and many condemned a literal interpretation of its markings. Much of its language and description remained impenetrable. Why, for example, should the map indicate multiple cities, instead of just one, as the books of old taught? Why should the largest of these, indicated on the Warrant in flaring red, bear the name *qalat*, which in the ancient tongues meant 'vessel' or 'prison'? Perhaps the most controversial feature of the document was the fact that, though it indicated the location of the cities, most of the pathways shown appeared to circumvent them.

Others, sensing the possibility of powerful artifacts, allowed the map full possession of their minds. These brethren posited that, owing to the nature of the city's founder, the relics there discovered—should the city still exist—would include every kind of ritual weapon, idol, and heretical object. Amid such ruins might be discovered tombs, libraries, or perhaps the great colossi themselves whose strange utterances were heard by ancient prophets in dream. Those who discovered such relics would surely be overcome with the ecstasies of possession itself: the dark and potent epiphanies of exhumation, the fanatical fashioning of reliquaries, and the secret communion of blood and objects.

Like the Holy Church, we too sought out the relics of the ancient ones with great fervor, though our own mandate long predated Christ. As the thirst for religious *fragmenta* became insatiable, and the Holy Lands were gradually emptied of the skulls and humeri of the saints,

we set our sights upon a different ossuary: the remains and relics of the reviled ones, of Barrabas, Elymas, Balaam, and them whose names had fallen under centuries of curse. Yet we sought after these portions, not for the sake of future pilgrims who should come from afar to venerate them, but that we might do so ourselves.

With the pale light of dawn, the footpath was revealed to twist over a vast midden of earthenware shards. The remains of these ancient vessels possessed such grotesque shapes that their original functions were entirely mysterious to me; all were formed of the same unornamented, gray-brown clay, bearing the cracks and erosion of many ages, and the sooty accreta of a vast and cataclysmic fire.

The debris seemed indicative of previous habitation, and at first I was convinced I had reached the outer perimeter of that Holy City I sought. After traversing the field of shards for several miles, I began to suspect they were not associated with the habitations of men, but of something far older.

The path sloped downward, obscured by the detritus of an ancient flood, then widened at last to a bleached alluvium, amidst which was an expansive charnel-ground dominated by fields of bone and ash. Many of these scattered cremains were indeed human, but ground exceedingly fine, discernable fragments were seldom larger than an orbit, tooth or phalange. A fine powder rose as I walked, and soon nausea crept upon me, each inhalation increasingly constricted by the acrid vapor of man-dust.

At the approach of noontide these silent and bleak environs gave way at last to a massive and sloping berm of barren red ochre, clearly some ancient earthwork. It was surmounted by a great hedge of crucifixion thorn, extending to the northern and southern horizons. So tight was the weave of its branches that no light could pierce it; nor was I afforded aught but the most obscure glimpse of its tangled interior. Yet, after climbing the slope to inspect this hedge, amidst the bristling spines my eyes soon discerned a tiny strand of red yarn skillfully woven, a faint but perpetual streak whose presence waxed and

waned amid the great thorn's congested limbs. I followed this curious red line south for the better part of an hour before it terminated at a great arched portal cut into the hedge. Its interior was dark, and I could see no further into its shadow than perhaps a dozen strides. Above the arch, a rude slab of worm-eaten desert holly was hung, pierced by a multitude of corroded nails and bearing an inscription in Latin:

I CONTAIN WHAT THE EARTH REJECTS.

Contemplation of the placard's meaning was interrupted by a deathly fetor arising from within the passageway. In the shadow of the sign stood a rough-hewn pole of ebony, to which was affixed the flayed head of a he-goat, attended by a swarming host. Despite the desecration of its flesh, the goat's curling horns were carefully adorned with paint, the right stained with pitch and the left with red ochre. Bunches of dried clover and cudweed were affixed to this pole with rough-spun woolen yarn, and all about the base of this Tree of Odium a great many coins were scattered, some gold, and several bearing the faces of kings dead more than two millennia.

With caution I began to proceed past the malodorous herm, but after three steps forward, its attendant cloud of black flies swarmed angrily and drove me back. Successive attempts to pass were met with renewed hostility; in a matter of moments my hands, neck and face were covered with stinging wheals. Thus was my progress into the hedge-portal barred, and my pace driven backward to face the rancorous goat-warden once more.

Confronting the effigy a second time, I drew out a gold coin and offered it at the base of the pole, offering a silent prayer to the Unknown God that entrance might be granted. This enraged the swarm, which now converged upon my open purse, stinging my hands so severely that I lost my grip, and the entirety of its coins spilled out upon the ground before the pole. At this moment the flies settled quietly upon the goat-head. In this curious turn of events, passage into the portal was permitted, as suddenly as I had been attacked.

Newly harrowed by these events, I passed within the shadow of the great thorn-barrier, which was soon revealed to be the thick outer wall

of a vast hedge-maze. Herein every kind of tree was hard-pruned into a stark rectilinear form of unwavering height, forming the walls of an immense labyrinth of green.

After spending more than a month in desert and thistle-choked badlands, I found the sudden presence of green vegetative growth disaffecting. A consultation of the Warrant offered no illumination: the only descriptions of the landscape of the valley surrounding the city Qalat were austere, using such words as *tikan* (thorn) and *çöllüq* (wasteland).

Close discernment of the leaves in the hedge revealed many hedges to be comprised of such usually stately trees as beech, elm, and oak. The same was true of the fantastic topiaries placed amid these convolutions. Prominent among these enfoliated shapes was a hay-wain; a charging bullock; and a great horned altar. Yet their purpose remained obscure and disconnected from the maze itself, and seemed little more than follies or a clever gardener's conceit.

Thus I turned away from the topiary, proceeding into empty, unwelcoming maze-twists. Verdant passages opened before me, in turn widening to broad, empty turf avenues. These would abruptly narrow, straying wildly from their established courses, through a procession of blinds and calculated twists, adhering strictly to some evasive design. Despite the majestic destinations each of these complex by-ways seemed to promise, all terminated in a hedge wall far at the perimeter, permitting no deeper passage into the labyrinth.

The absolute silence and stillness of the air was oppressive. I sought for the sound of a bird or insect, if only to affirm this dominion as a part of Nature. But the absence of these things, combined with the expansive and precisely-sculpted verdure, was increasingly unnerving. In truth, it had been many days since I had encountered animals of any kind, and even then it had been a single carrion bird at a distance.

In the course of my tortuous passage, phantom faces soon emerged from the hedge: amid the thick-leaved corridors a number of curious statues stood, each carved of gray gneiss in the likeness of some ancient personage. Some were situated before pools or mirrors, others behind miniature altars; still others extended their arms upward or in sweeping gestures, as if preaching to some spectral congregation.

The sublime artistry of their carving bespoke the work of a clearly accomplished stonemason, yet in their presence I felt an emptiness characterized by the absence of both inspiration and potential. Each statue seemed to arrogate the moment and space which it presided over, and despite their vague familiarity I did not ultimately recognize any of the faces. The effigies provoked such a sense of unease that as I passed them, I held firm their gaze, for it seemed they might at any moment, with a sudden upwelling of blood from beyond, become animate and commit some brutal treachery.

Another hour's wandering took me far from the statues' influence, and closer to what was clearly the center of the maze. Here the hedges grew lower and further apart. A great sloping meadow now opened before me, forming a circular rise fragrant with the sweet scent of white melilot and devil's bit.

I sat upon the greensward, contemplating the map. Having spent the entirety of the day wandering this place, I had clearly succumbed to its influence, though I could not characterize it. That such great care been taken to create and maintain such a garden amid the deserts was an enigma, but it brought me no closer to the City of Cain. I resolved that this place was part of the outlying barrens indicated in the map, lying to the south and west of the city ruins, labeled as 'the margins'. Yet, the presence of ancient coins at the entrance to this dominion suggested that this was a place of grave import, and perhaps other riches lie within.

In the disquieting stillness my awareness, independent of volition, seemed to distort and extend beyond my present frame of reference. For reasons I could not explain, the preponderance of green about me suddenly darkened, and at once I entered into a vivid memory of the abbey, many weeks before, on the last night before I set forth to seek the lands of the Red Warrant.

I sat in the lamplit rectory of Sister Ousia, our prelate excursus, who wished to impart counsel before my departure. She unrolled the Writ of Propsect, the document authorizing my expedition. It

bore the ornamented seal of Abba Kastethios, our father superior, and the *ænigma*, the stylized representation of the barren altar that is the symbol of our order. I had never met the Sister in private but her name was well known and respected among us, and her mystical pedigree impeccable.

She studied the paper at length, and though there were no visible changes to her face, I sensed hesitation. Still, as her eyes passed over the thin scroll, I sought to determine what I might from her own features. It was impossible to tell her age, for she possessed a great many characteristics of youth, but also of many ages beyond. Unlike many sisters of the order, she did not constrain her hair, rather it hung in thick locks, throwing shadows across her face at the slightest turn her of head. In her face one might read both severity and kindness, insistence on principle, analytical skill, and the dormant seeds of wrath. But with several blinks of my eyes, these potentials seemed to change, and she exhibited yet other possibilities. The more I studied her, the more these shifts in light and perception multiplied the avenues of interpretation, and amid this swarm of what might be, she was ultimately rendered inscrutable. At last I ceased my visual inquisition, content at least that her glamours matched her reputation. Just as I turned my eyes away, her head shifted, briefly revealing what appeared to be a ragged, triangular scar at the edge of her forehead.

Ousia looked up at me presently, eyes level and steady. "I shall not attempt to dissuade you in this pilgrimage, as you have the full faith of the Order, which of course includes the support of Kastethios and myself. But I will tell you in confidence that I consider yours to be a fool's errand."

Her directness and blank affect unnerved me. Yet, with all superior prelates, who were trained in rhetoric, we welcomed such unadorned speech, even when it conveyed the most unpleasant of truths.

"The Warrant has stood in our possession for nearly sixteen years," I said. "And not one of our number has sought out the peculiar lands it depicts. I feel its call...it has unfolded its face to me in dream."

She stood and walked to the great cloister window. Beyond it, the dying sunlight illuminated the ragged precipice plunging nearly a mile to the currents of the great Arat below. Against the diffraction of

red and orange, the whole of her form was thrown into an elongated silhouette.

"Brother," she asked with her back to me, "Has it ever occurred to you that, owing to their vitiating nature, there are some places that should not be mapped?"

"Indeed it has not. I would hear more of this doctrine, if you would tell it."

She turned to face me. Hers was the mask of absolute certainty in the face of unspoken and abhorrent realities. I sought for the strange marking on her brow, but it was no longer visible. "Others sought the lands portrayed on the Red Warrant, hoping them to yield up the old secrets. Thirteen years ago, I myself went with three others of this abbey to find these accursed places. Our pilgrimage was, shall I say, *obstructed*. By the grace of a guiding dream, I alone found my way back."

The revelation intrigued me, but I was undeterred. "And what revelations did the Map yield?"

The Sister Prelate proffered an ambiguous mien, her eyes tracing the form of my face in swift, calligraphic motions. Her lips seemed poised on the brink of forceful proclamation, but nothing emerged.

"Because we have offered ourselves to the Unknown One," she said at last, "I shall meet you in your devotion, and let my response stand unspoken."

An unwelcome silence descended and the memory fled, producing a sudden but brief shuddering in my limbs. The vast, static tyranny of the greensward and surrounding labyrinth returned to my present perception. Ousia and the abbey suddenly seemed as abstracted as a distant star.

I stood and crested the hill to find a vast circular enclosure. At its heart stood a ringed complex of dilapidated wattle and daub buildings, their ancient timber frames sagging; amid them all I saw the pale glow of firelight. The smell of dung and silage, as well as a great complex of wooden enclosures, suggested livestock, but none were to be seen or heard.

As I approached, the structures became more discernible in the twilight; they appeared to be great thatched-roof barns in a state of disrepair. Rude as these habitations were, they nourished a source of relief within me, for the day was at an end and my crooked circuit through the silent maze had left me weary. Perhaps, amidst these ruins, I might find shelter to pass the night before proceeding out of the labyrinth in the morning.

My ascent brought me to an expansive wooden balustrade. Its timbers were coarsely hewn, bound with rotted strands of rope and sinew, the thick vertical posts terminating in spikes. Age and decay had caused sections of the palisade to heave, giving the illusion of a roiling sea of decomposing logs, rising and falling in enormous waves. The whole, so far as I could see, bristled with thousands of ancient iron nails, driven to varying depths in the flesh of the wood, as if transfixing the whole of its form in effigy. A wide wooden door was set into the arched framing, blackened with successive layers of black ash and dried blood, also pierced with scores of nails. The wood was graven with a curious seal, and the following words in Old Elamite:

Power unto the Knife of Slaughter,
Protection for the Flock,
Appeasement of the Wrathful Dead,
And Vengeance Seven-fold
Upon the Brow of the Proscribed One.

An old iron lock had long succumbed to decay and lie on the ground, split neatly into three rusting fragments. The door swung open with mild effort, and my eyes beheld a scene of decrepit grandeur.

A vast colonnade of horned caryatids extended into the dark extremities of the compound, each bearing in her outstretched arms a stained but empty offering-bowl. As I proceeded past these stone maidens, each face became progressively more arrogant. This change in expression was also accompanied by the presence of a kind of strangling vine, such that the final figures in the retinue had completely succumbed to a tangled mass of green tendrils and leaves, their facial features occluded. At the terminus of the columns was a red wooden

door upon which was affixed the skull of a ram, beneath which were graven the words:

Hail the Great Deceiver,
The exalted Lord of the Lie,
Who is King of the World.

The door swung open at my touch, and I proceeded into a candlelit corridor. Sweet incense haunted the passageways, the hoary savor of Old Sabæa. I seemed to advance as if in dream, pacing out long strides, but making no progress; the halls became as the cloister of a rustic country temple—some vast cowshed transformed by coarse labor and devotion into a church fit for the worship of the High God Agrestos. Low stone altars bearing horns filled with hay, corn, and dried herbs stood within little wayside shrines.

Upon each altar stood a small terra cotta effigy. Each was, in seeming, a representation of an offended god, his arms outstretched in anger to the heavens, face contorted by a rage at some wretched and nameless betrayal. Though each figure was slightly different, all were clearly representative of the same deity; some of the agonized expressions suggested excruciating pain, others outrage, still others angry self-righteousness. All were covered in dried blood, but whether it was that of human or beast, I could not tell.

In the dim lamplight, I now discerned a level stratum of white mist floating just above my head. As I followed this cloud through the bends and twists of the corridor, it waxed thicker and more heavily scented, bearing beneath its odor of religious devotion a fleeting cadaverous smell. I recalled with sudden mental violation the putrescence of the guardian of the thorn-gates, and my chastisement by its attendant legion.

At last the passageway opened to a wide room aglow with many lights and fuming braziers. Scores of tallow candles illuminated a barrel-vaulted chamber with earthen walls, at the center of which stood a long table spread with a feast. Upon a covering of hides various rustic cheeses were laid, together with rough-gathered wayside herbs and fruits, and platters heaped with roast meats. Swollen wineskins also

rested in waiting, set before simple earthenware goblets.

Until this moment my mind had been absent of hunger, engrossed in the mystery of the labyrinth and its recurrent spoor of diabolism. Yet now, upon beholding this feast, each of its portions arrested my senses, their very appearance incepting delirium: a sparkling cup of bramble wine the color of perfect garnet; fresh-dug tubers, pungent earth still clinging to them; the golden six-fold tracery of a waxen comb within a candle-lit crock of honey. The longer I beheld these banquet-offerings, the more I craved them; yet I could not be certain if this was due to common hunger or some remarkable quality the objects exerted over my senses.

My reverie was interrupted by unexpected motion, a dark blur in the depths of smoke and firelight. At the far end of the table, upon a feasting-couch of clean straw, a ruddy youth of divine proportions reclined. Arrayed in rough black wool, his broad forehead bore the curved horns of the Himalayan ram, crowning a face at once handsome and vain. He sprawled in indolence, well-muscled limbs slack from some unknown torpor, perhaps excess wine. Were it not for the slow rise of his chest to mark his breath, he would have appeared to my eyes a painted statue of an earth-god, silen, or a devil suspended in stillness by enchantment.

With this sudden visual irruption, the unseemly truth of my circumstance became plain. My journey, undertaken as it was in absolute solitude, had occasioned a serenity of mind wherein perceptual faculties enabled a liberating communion with all objects in my path. Despite the disquieting nature of many of the signs observed in the labyrinth, each had been perceived in the contemplative nexus of quietude and corporeal stasis, giving rise to a kind of 'waking dream' wherein it seemed that the subtle qualities of things shone more perceptibly.

My days in solitary absorption of the desert roads had not, however, prepared me for the emergence of this beast-man, many times my size and strength. And to be certain, he was no man, but a demon, as all of the signs upon the Way thus far had indicated. Yet were not demons phantoms invisible, discarnate but menacing spirits, filling the vessels of mortal flesh overfull with their malevolent outpourings?

This carnal creature stood defiant of all my learning and experience, and of the teachings of our order.

At last he turned to look at me, his face arrogant and perturbed.

"I bow to no man," he sneered, "But you shall bow to me."

As he spoke, teeth became visible —large, coarse, and seemingly made of pitted stone. His voice was deep and sonorous, gravid with ancient authority, yet also bearing the wild and sorrowful timbre of a beast in its death-throes.

Wary of his size, I knelt to the horned one, silently entreating the Unknown God for intercession. As I did, my coin-purse lurched and a single golden coin rolled out, coming to rest several paces from the demon. Seeing the coin, he gurgled with delight, and rose from his bed, snatching it up in his rough hands. By the light of each candle he scrutinised it, muttering to himself, as if in its metal he divined wondrous auguries. Finally he fixed his gaze upon me direct, extending the coin into the air before him, saying:

"By my power I gain'd the favor of the most high,
Yet was brought lowest.
My works shone in great glory,
Yet my Kingdom was laid waste before my coronation."

These words were spoken with obvious pride, but also an aggrieved acrimony that seemed to seek commiseration. Dull yellow eyes, like those of a goat, stared at me in silence, as if expecting a response to his riddle. When none was offered, the devil paced forward several steps, extending the coin again and speaking a second time:

"The Flesh of the Virgin wast torn and burn'd,
The Flesh of my Flesh betray'd.
'Gainst the Holy One I ever turn'd,
For the Helping-Hand wast stay'd."

He paced several more steps toward me and his head inclined slightly, as if prompting me a second time to respond. Yet his great size and hideous splendor had all but arrested my mind, allowing no sanctuary

for reason, let alone a reply. His face drew nearer to mine, eyes narrowing to slits as he spoke a third time:

"Praise be the Halls of the Hollow Earth,
Where-in false prophets prophesy true:
Indolent in life wast I,
Yet my corpse grew sweet with virtue."

As before, I offered neither answer nor question to his mystery, transfixed by his bestial and alien form. Despite his fleshly beauty and verbal eloquence, he openly defecated before me. Indeed, as he approached, evidence of past soilings became apparent, on the floor and about his hooves.

"*Quod Abominor!*" he spat. "Know ye nothing of my dominion?" He grasped a large melon from the feast-table and raised it up, as if to hurl it at me.

"It would seem, my Lord, in accord with thy riddles and fearsome appearance, that verily thou art Marsyas, that hoary satyr flayed alive at Apollo's decree for the sin of hubris." Again, I knelt before him, fearful that my refusal to do so would be considered provocation.

On receipt of my answer and genuflection, the horned youth's face curled into a sneer. He quickly turned away and paced back to his feasting-couch, where he hung his head in contemplation, occasionally peering over his shoulder at me. After a time in silence he returned, bearing an obsidian skinning-knife, his face now restored to its former conceit. Gesturing with the knife, he drew my attention to the sumptuous banquet-offerings.

"Long have you walked to find me," he said. "Therefore, partake of my hospitality. Render tribute to me and my works. Worship now, at my table. Eat, for these beasts have been slaughtered by mine own hand." He grunted, gesturing again to the carved meats, whereupon there arose an odor so savory I could not but do his bidding. And I sat at his table and he began to prepare a plate for me.

His baleful mood now passed, it was clear he was pleased to host me. He laughed to himself, and his formerly threatening presence was now eclipsed by unrestrained enthusiasm for his own meal. Eat-

ing using only his hands and the flaying knife, he speared meats and drained wine-skins, ate whole cheeses and sucked marrow from great bones. In order to preserve my own appetite, I averted my eyes from him as I ate.

The taste of his victuals was, at first, wholly in accord with their marvelous aroma. However, after several bites, the more fleeting their virtues seemed, until after several moments they had become mealy, insipid, and of a wholly unpleasant flavor. At length the water-goblet grew rank as a standing pool, subject to the same bewitchment as my plate. I dare not look too long at my portion, for where once I had beheld the succulent image of a country feast, my plate was now piled with offal and crawling flies. This profound and total corruption of the banquet forced me to conclude my meal before it was half eaten; at the same time, I perceived a sickening of my fleshly senses, as if poisoned by an excess of sour wine and morphia.

With a sudden outburst of flatulence, my host rose from the table and brought more wine. "Eat," he bid me, resuming his meal. "Partake. Enjoy. But I must now demand you pay tribute unto me with sacrifice."

Was not the whole of my money sufficient to appease him? I searched amid my meager belongings for a suitable offering, but in my onset of delirium was hard pressed to find anything sufficiently impressive to pre-empt his wrath. Amid the poverty of my belongings, at last I drew forth my ampullus of drinking water, prepared to offer the whole of it as ransom for my license to depart. And yet despite this, my host's eyes fell not upon the phial of water. Instead they were transfixed by the scroll of the Red Warrant, a small portion of which was visible.

"Speak to me of the book," he said eagerly, face alight with fascination.

I drew it out slowly, and set it upon the table. "Tis but an old map," I told him, "Said to represent these lands, but I am doubtful of its veracity."

"Do not deceive me, stranger," the hoary one commanded. "Do you not think I know man-skin when I behold it? Give it me. I shall discern its true worth."

In an attempt to distract him, I pointed to a feature on the map portion of the scroll. "These barrens here, in the western foothills of the great mountain...it would seem that this is your domain. What lies beyond them, to the south?"

He flung another recently-emptied wineskin against the wall. His head drew nearer to mine, and the human and caprine attributes of his face seemed to blur: the man entreating my reason, the beast suggesting insane and arbitrary violence.

"Do you not know," he said calmly, "That *there is no beyond*—there is only here." His great hand reached forth and picked up the scroll, unrolling it with a gentleness I would not have suspected him capable of.

As he scrutinized the parchment, I watched his face. Beneath the skin, the musculature seemed to flicker over his broad skull in waves. These ripplings and spasms suggested the movement of worms beneath the flesh; as soon as they might seem to convey atrocity, their motion shifted to indicate amazement. The goat-eyes widened, and the mouth slowly opened.

The transfixion of these image-revelations in a single moment overcame my senses, and their vibrant hauntings caused me once against to question the nature of the venomous feast of which I had just partaken. Still, there was no time for contemplation, for my Host arose suddenly, his face contorted with angry surprise.

"*Ahizat Ainayim!* The Scriptures of the Betrayer!" he growled. "Let it be brought forth unto the high holocaust of mine altar!" He moved to seize the map, but his motions were blunted by wine. In his eagerness he overreached, and I was able to gather the scroll into my pack.

"*Infidel!*" he roared. "*Know ye not that this is the place where all flesh is forfeit?*"

In that instant, his hand swung forth with great force, dragging his flaying knife across my brow. With his other hand he clawed at the wound and forcefully wrested forth a strip of skin. Holding the scrap of my torn brow aloft, he roared in exultation:

A-Kal-Ha-Da-Ma-A-Ma-Lak!
A-Ma-Lak-Gu-Gulak-A-Ma-Lak!

Harried by agony and the good guidance of saints unknown, I ran back through the enclosure, through the convolutions of the moonlit maze, back to the very portal of the thorn-hedge. The sound of the demon's footfalls were ever close behind. As I passed through the portico of nails, their forms seemed to glow brightly in the moonlight, and this pale radiance arrested his advance: the god's grotesque satyric form could be seen standing within the shadow of the portal, stamping his hooves, and proffering gestures of threat. But beyond its spine-bristled walls he did not venture, nor could his shouts of outrage echo in the wastes beyond.

JOE BANDEL makes his home in north central Minnesota. He love the outdoors, computers, writing and translating German literatur from the years 1890-1920. His Hanns Heinz Ewers translations in clude: *Alraune*, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, *Illustrated Stories*, *Hann Heinz Ewers Volume I & II* as well as the *Hanns Heinz Ewers Brevier* Other German authors he has translated include Karl Hans Strobl (*Le muria* Book I) and Stanislaw Przybyszewski (*The Synagogue of Satan*)

ANDREW D. CHUMBLEY (1967-2004) was a British artist, schola and magical practitioner specialising in witchcraft and ritual magic He is best known for his esoteric work *Qutub* (1995) which exposit the power of the *Shaitan* or Opposer through a 72-stanza poem witl a uniquely-devised meter. Mr. Chumbley was also, at the time of hi death, finalising his doctoral studies at SOAS, University of London researching dream-incubation ritual in the ancient Near East.

MICHAEL CISCO is the author of novels *The Divinity Student* (Buzzcit Press, 1999, winner of the International Horror Writers Guild awar for best first novel of 1999), *The Tyrant* (Prime, 2004), *The San Venefi cio Canon* (Prime, 2005), *The Traitor* (Prime, 2007), *The Narrator* (Civi Coping Mechanisms, 2010), *The Great Lover* (Chomu Press, 2011), *Cel ebrant* (Chomu Press, 2012), and *MEMBER* (Chomu Press 2013). Hi short story collection, *Secret Hours*, was published by Mythos Pres in 2007, and his short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologie as well. Michael lives and teaches in New York City.

PATRICIA CRAM's work explores the crossroads at which the cultura and political collide with the mythic and magical. Possession and vio lence are integral to her process. A novel and a collection of shor pieces are forthcoming.

BRIAN EVENSON has been long fascinated with that moment when you see an injured bird fluttering across the ground and, walking closer, discover it not to be a bird at all but a leaf. His fiction is about bringing to life the bird again, transforming the ordinary into the uncanny, shifting orders of being, destabilizing the world to reveal the sometimes dangerous magic furled within. His most recent of his dozen books are the story collection *Windeye*, and the post-apocalyptic novel *Immobility*.

HANNS HEINZ EWERS (1872-1943) was a World War I spy, actor, proponent for gay rights, advocate for the creative merits of intoxication, and Germany's most successful author of strange and macabre fiction in the early 20th century. His deep interest in occultism informed much of his work, including his most famous tale, "The Spider." His brief involvement with the burgeoning NSDAP ended when it was discovered that Ewers strongly disagreed with the Party's views on Jews and homosexuals. As a result, the Nazis banned Ewers' books, seized his assets and declared him an un-person. This political affiliation damaged the author's international reputation for many years, condemning him to relative obscurity. However the new millennium has seen a resurgence of interest in the author's uniquely decadent creations.

Childhood fascinations with the Magi of Biblical lore, with places of neglect, and with the expansive sense of interiority that occurred during bouts of illness each informed RICHARD GAVIN's "Wormwood Votaries." The author describes his fiction-writing process as a perennial assimilation; the unconscious, non-volitional interweaving of images, impressions, themes, and principles until a cohesive narrative ultimately emerges. "Wormwood Votaries" marries his youthful world-impressions with replications of scenarios he recently experienced in Dream.

KENNETH GRANT (1924-2011) was interested in a wide variety of spiritual and esoteric pursuits, which he transmuted through his magical and mystical experience to distil over several decades a unique

and substantial body of work, principally the nine volumes of his *Ty phonian Trilogies*. As well as producing articles, reviews, several vo umes of poetry, and some captivating drawings and paintings, he als wrote a number of fascinating novels and short stories on occult an mystical themes, many of them subsequently published in a serie entitled collectively the *Nightside Narratives*.

CAITLÍN R. KIERNAN is the author of eleven novels and more tha two hundred short stories. Her most recent novel, *The Drowning Gir A Memoir*, received the Bram Stoker and James Tiptree, Jr. award as well as nominations for the Nebula, Mythopoeic, Locus, Worl Fantasy, British Fantasy, and Shirley Jackson awards. Her short fic tion has been collected in such volumes as *Tales of Pain and Wonde A is for Alien*, and *The Ape's Wife and Other Stories*, and she recentl returned to comics with *Alabaster: Wolves* for Dark Horse. She lives i Providence, Rhode Island.

LEE MORGAN's oeuvre, including fiction, poetry, non-fiction, an scholarship, is marked by an obsession with the sorcerous power o narrative. From *A Deed Without a Name* to the realms of occult fic tion with *Wooing the Echo* and the author's upcoming *Unless They'r Wicked*, Morgan seeks to unfold one subtly interconnecting tal throughout many books and genres, linked to each other throug strange signs and echoing motifs. This crafting of haunted texts als manifests in a preoccupation with the Romantic aesthetic and philo sophical legacy (as explored in essay form in the Three Hands Pres anthology *Hands of Apostasy*) from which these preoccupations coul be said to take their roots.

DANIEL A. SCHULKE is an author and artist exploring themes o embodied spiritual transgression. His work has appeared in the eso teric journals *Starfire* and *The Cauldron*, and will soon be published i *The God Zero*. His story 'Verger', which appears in this collection, i excerpted from the magical allegory *Cities of Cain*, forthcoming fro Three Hands Press.

SUN YUNG SHIN is a poet and writer who has always been entranced by fairy tales and fables, from Korean folktales about devious female ghosts in the form of foxes to the dire and grisly landscapes of contemporary zombie films. Her books include two books of poetry, an anthology, and a bilingual children's book: *Rough, and Savage*; *Skirt Full of Black*; *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*; and *Cooper's Lesson*. Her writing can be found in many anthologies, journals, magazines, venues and she enjoys bringing poetry to unusual spaces and community events. She was born in Seoul, Korea and has lived in Chicago, Boston, and Pittsburgh. She now lives in Minneapolis and embraces the spectral in all its facets, literary and otherwise.

DON WEBB has been a member of the Temple of Set, a Left Hand Path magical order, since 1989. He has written many works on the magical quest for self-deification in both Late Antiquity and modern times. A professional writer since 1986, Webb has had speculative fiction in a wide range of magazines, from *Analog* to *Weird Tales*, and over 50 stories in anthologies.

Penumbræ was published April 2015 by Three Hands Press. Of the first edition were two thousand five hundred cloth hardcover copies with colour dust jacket and fifty special edition copies in full bistre goatskin and marbled endpaper, blocked with a device designed by James Dunk. Fine leather bindings designed by Daniel A. Schulke and executed by The Key Printing and Binding, Oakland, California.

SCRIBAE QUO MYSTERIUM FAMULATUR

PENUMBRAE

'The interior logic of occult fiction is in a certain respect an illogic, for its power lies in its ability to bypass the left-brain reasoning that dominates material reality. It accomplishes this by seducing the reader with a verisimilitude; a seeming reality that is only employed to usher in the powerful sensations of the unknown, the forces that our rationale would often reject if encountered without the smoke-and-mirror seduction of story logic.'

RICHARD GAVIN

Through the Gate of Horn:
Occult Fiction and the Primordial Image